

竹町

illustration

トマリ

02

《愛娘》のグレート

教室

tion of mission impossib



ファンタジア文庫

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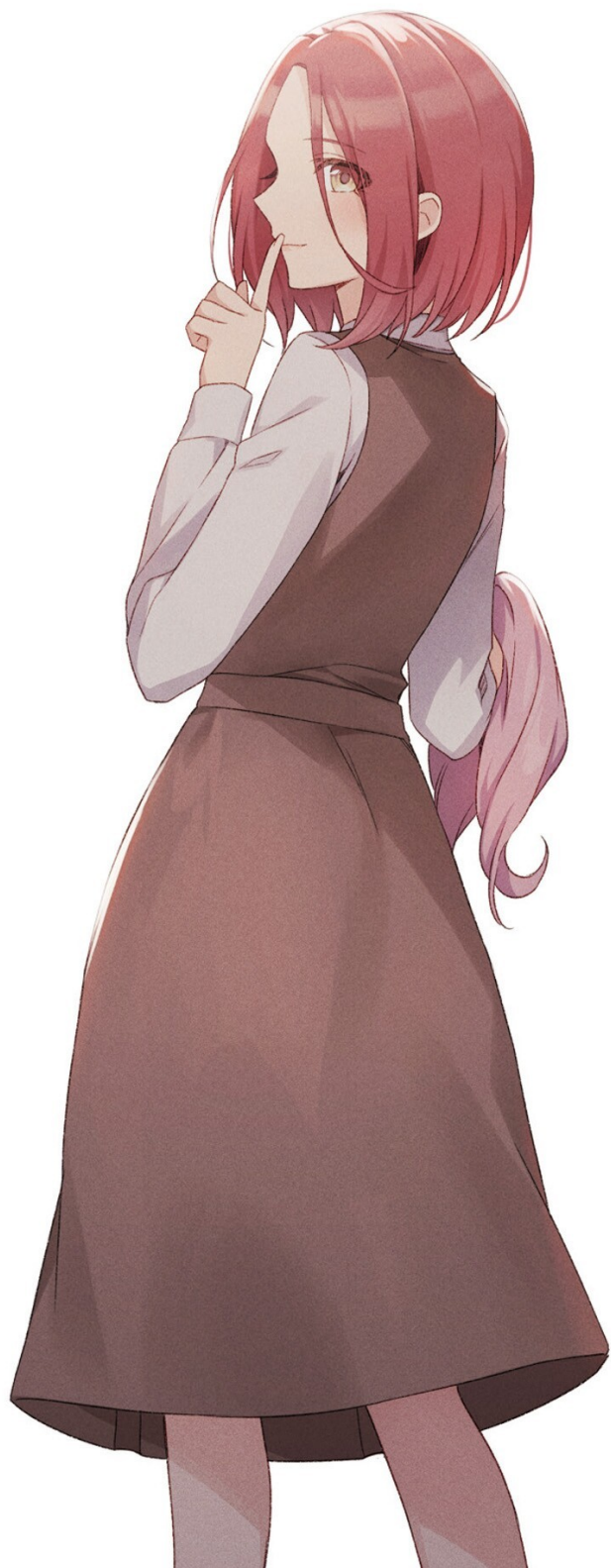
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Illustrations

《愛娘》のグレート

スパイ教室

02





SPY ROOM
the room is a specialized institution of mission impossible
code name manumusume

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C O N T E N T S

Prologue: Succession

The burial of the corpse took place at a public graveyard. In front of the grave stood a beautiful man. His long hair, unbefitting of his male image, drenched from the rain, sticking to his cheeks. His unrefined long hair hid the man's elegant face, most likely to prevent him from sticking out, but having come to a graveyard in the deep night during a pouring rain made him more of an irregularity.

Because of his line of work, he hated being the middle of attention, but just this once, he decided against paying much mind to him standing out.

The man's profession was being a spy. His name, Ron. Though he had several other names he went by, this was the name he felt most acquainted with.

No other person was present at the graveyard. On this chilly night with the rain befitting the atmosphere, he was the only person to visit the grave with shovel and lantern in hand.

With saddened eyes, he gazed down at the grave. On the gravestone, a great number of people's names were engraved. However, they didn't belong to the deceased. The names engraved in the stone were all fake names used by the deceased.

The greater majority of spies would not leave any traces of them having lived behind. However, that was more than enough. The information they had gathered—accomplishments, morals, memories, will, they were all inherited by the people left behind.

Making sure that he wasn't seen by anybody, Ron pushed the shovel deep into the dirt, opening up the grave. So that the coffin wouldn't be damaged, he dug around it. Once he finished his work, he took out a small white box from his chest pocket, putting it into the deepest part of the hole.

"Teacher...I'll make sure at least a finger of yours is buried here."

Finishing his prayers, he once again filled the hole with dirt, and let out a sigh as this act was completed. The ones having been buried here were his former comrades. The spy team 'Homura'. They took Ron into the world of spies as he was just a poor orphan, raising him to become a first-rate spy, acting like a family to him.

As Ron was dwelling in memories with them, a person appeared behind him. "Sensei..."

Turning around, there stood eight girls, carrying black umbrellas. The uniform of the fictional religious institution on their bodies oddly enough fit with the graveyard.

"I didn't ask you all to come here." Ron narrowed his eyes.

Out of the girls, the silver-haired one was the first to take a step forward, the leader Lily. In her hand, she had a bottle of wine. Pulling out the plug, she poured some of the contents on the gravestone. Following that, she put her hands together, shutting her eyes.

The bottle of wine was passed around between the girls, as they poured a bit of the liquid on the gravestone, finishing their prayers. Midway, one of them apparently had misjudged the amount of wine they used, as the last person only had two to three drops left. From the looks of it, they still had to keep an eye out on smaller, detailed work such as this. That being said, Ron thoroughly believed in their latent potential.

"Teacher, please watch us. The nine here will be the new team, following after 'Homura'—called 'Tomoshibi'." Ron spoke towards the gravestone. Naturally, no response came. However, he was certain that it got through to his teacher. After giving his family a round of greetings as well, Ron lowered his gaze towards the girls. Standing in front of this grave, there was something he had to make sure of.

"If we decide to stay together as 'Tomoshibi', then we will have to take on the missions of 'Homura', and in this case, to investigate the spy team that brought ruin to 'Homura', called 'Hebi'. This will not be an easy feat, so you best be prepared."

"The pay for that ain't half bad, right?"

"I have admired 'Homura' anyway."

"We're going to save lots of people."

"The great me has the most fun with everyone!"

"If I can stay with the Boss..."

They each gave their own words. Origin, motives to become a spy, aspirations, each and every one of them had a different reason that let them stay in 'Tomoshibi'. However, the answer was all the same.

Finally, Lily spoke up, as her facial expression grew softer.

"If I can become a worthy leader...a blooming, proud individual."

"...Marvelous."

Together with these words, the girls each lowered their heads to the gravestone, turning on their heels. A strong will was residing in all of their eyes. That they all wanted to continue their training right away. Ron could tell just from a glance.

The moment Ron walked away, he gave the grave one last gaze. In order to renew his promise with his late teacher.

"This time...I will protect them."

He would certainly not come here for a while. And his family, resting in that grave, most likely didn't wish for him to either.

Chapter 1: Disguise

The world is riddled with pain and suffering—

From ancient times, wars have ended after a few months. Countries find hate in the other, or battle for resources, and yet, it always had to be paused to harvest the crops. When the guns and bullets ran low, defeat had to be accepted in a resolute manner, and retreat followed—until one found blissful success in research to fight back.

The foundation of the Industrial Revolution, the steam locomotive, and even the creation of boats or driven cars, they all created an insane warp in the means of transportation. Resources for another war were created in great mass, and delivered a vast number of nutrients from a completely different continent. On top of that, soldiers could be brought over from the colonies. The war resulting from this new revolution blew past any predictions, continuing to get more intense even after years. In this war, no winner was crowned. All of humanity who participated in it would say the same.

—A war has a horrible cost performance.

The economy will stagnate, the citizens will end up exhausted, and the country's power declines dramatically. The only countries who have gained from this endless battling are the colonies across the oceans who have provided the participants with resources. But that was all.

As a result of this, the various countries found in our world fully cut off their previous beliefs. Wars like these could not be allowed to happen again. An international agency for peace was established, and the time of coordination arrived. Naturally, they would not throw away their aspirations and desires. However, on the front, there was no need to point guns at each other. In order to gain whatever they wanted—they could just choose another method.

And thus, the [War waged in Light] came to an end, lifting the curtains for the new era, a battle of information fought by spies—the [War waged in Shadows].

The Republic of Deen participated in this [War waged in Shadows]. Talking about the intelligence agency before the war, they had the Military Division, and the Navy Division. However, the two were not able to get along, and with the characteristically strict view of the military authorities, they were mere beginners as an intelligence agency. As a result, after the World War, the so-called 'Office of Foreign Intelligence' was created, with the means to transcend these two divisions.

In the middle of this Office of Foreign Intelligence stood the legendary intelligence agency team [Homura]. They had continued under the royal family ever since medieval times, and according to history, they were forced into asyl during the social revolutions, but the details are still clad in mysteries. Cooperating with the various military divisions, the Office of Foreign Intelligence showed rapid progress.

Then, once ten years had passed since the end of the World war—With plot, intrigue, and betrayal, the 38th generation of [Homura] was annihilated. That being said, the lone survivor of this, a young man, inherited their will. He used a temporary team for a single mission, and promoted this to an official team. The 39th generation of [Homura] wore another name compared to its predecessors.

[Tomoshibi].

The base of [Tomoshibi] was located at the port city, found in the Republic of Deen. It was one of the biggest commercial cities found inside the country. In one corner of this city, filled with companies specifiying in trading and such, stood a small building called 'Religious School Garmas'. If one walked down the path hidden in the storage house, another large building would show it's facade, a luxurious western-styled building, called the Kagerou Palace.

Having been a secret hideout for the royal family in the past, it definitely qualified as a palace, but not even the current residents of the city knew of its existence. Just until recently, wiretaps were laid out in the entire place in order to give a certain person access to all sorts of information, but now they had all been destroyed, guaranteeing full safety. Even if the location was pin-pointed, you could not tell what was happening inside, like an iron wall blocking off any unwanted guests.

“—Marvelous.” Ron observed the pompous western building, and found confirmation yet again.

He was a beautiful man. If one paid no mind to his height, he could be regarded as a woman. His limbs were slim and agile, together with his long hair, looking like it was made to hide his face. Though the person in question did this consciously, it gave him a rather indifferent impression, at least from his outer looks. His real age spanned up to twenty, but because of this calm and collected behaviour, he could even be in his later twenties or even thirties in someone's eyes.

He had three different profiles that made him special.

—One of those is being the boss of [Tomoshibi], giving orders to the eight girls working under him. It had been around ten days since he was away from the base. Opening the door to the Kagerou Palace, and walking down the hallway clad in the usual carpet, a single girl came jumping out, waving her hand at him with a calm smile.

“Ah, Sensei is back! Been a while!”

It was a lovable girl, with silver hair, called Lily. With said silver, glossy hair, and well endowed bust as a trademark, she would never stop smiling no matter the situation. This is what made her the leader of the eight girls. For Ron, it had equally been ten days since he had seen her.

"Yeah, it's been a while."

As he responded with these words, Lily drew closer, peeking up at his face.

"Was your trip overseas replenishing enough? You were off to the Kingdom of Lairat, weren't you? They're famous for their seafood, right!"

"It was quite fulfilling. What about your holidays?"

"Naturally, I'm back to full power! We got our salary, and ten days is enough to relax!"

Ron had given the girls ten days of free time. Back during the time where [Tomoshibi] was still only a temporary team, they had cleared a rigorous mission. Since they had been working until then without a day off almost, Ron decided that they should take a quick breather. Conveniently enough, the Office of Foreign Intelligence had paid them a good sum for the success, almost too much for the girls at their young age.

"I bought Sensei a souvenir, so if you could please follow me to the dining room!"

Telling about her activities over the last ten days in a gleeful manner, Lily pulled on Ron's arm. He wasn't even given the time to put down his bag. At the same time, he asked something that stuck with him.

"By the way, where are the others?"

The inside of the building was awfully quiet. To that, Lily puffed out her cheeks.

"Sadly, they are all still on their vacation. Every single one of them is just taking things too easy, aren't they."

Even after Ron moved his gaze through the building, he couldn't spot the other girls. Not even footsteps from the floor above them. The only thing that greeted him was an aromatic scent coming from the dining room, the fragrance of grilled bacon. It seemed that this was the souvenir the girl spoke of. Fitting it together with the time Ron would return, she must have prepared it.

The food itself had already been lined up on the table. On top of the snow white table cloth, bacon steak and a plate with fruits, not to mention a bottle of wine even. Right as Ron took one step inside the dining room however—

"—Just kidding, that was a lie~" Lily stuck out her tongue.

Following that, a great number of girls appeared from various positions: The shadow of the door, beneath the table cloth, the chandelier hanging from the ceiling, they all jumped at Ron. A surprise attack from all seven girls besides Lily, with restraining wires in their hands. However, in response to this sudden assault, Ron—

"Figures." He just shrugged his shoulders, as calmly as you could be.

As if he had anticipated an attack like this, he twisted his body to evade the first attack, whilst grabbing the table cloth with his long arms. Doing so, he pulled it off in one go. Oddly enough, the tableware on top of the cloth didn't move at all. Instead, he used this to throw it at the girls, almost like a casting net. The seven girls were caught in that, falling to the ground in a big clump.

"That was a bit too easy, wasn't it." Ron proudly declared.

He showed no glimmer of anger after being suddenly attacked by his subordinates. The only one showing any sort of reaction was Lily, as she formed a fist in frustration.

"Ugh...we were really hoping that you would be a bit off-guard after your holidays!"

"A first-rate spy doesn't have time to relax like that. I have to admit your growth, but you still have a long way to go."

"You say that, so at least teach us a few..."

"Your surprise attack has to be more drifting. That's all."

"You haven't grown that much at teaching either, I see!"

Another part of Ron's profile—He is an instructor.

The girls working with him in [Tomoshihi] are all drop-outs from their respective educational facilities. Though they have the slumbering talent inside of them, they had certain circumstances that did not allow them to fully bloom at these facilities. Hence, at the same time as acting as their boss, Ron equally became their instructor to make this dormant potential bloom.

—No matter the methods, they were to make Ron say 'I surrender'.

This being the special lesson granted by Ron, which allowed the girls to attack Ron at whenever they felt like it. Seeing that the girls went right back into the action after their long break, Ron nodded in a satisfying manner.

"I understand your motivation...Truly marvelous."

"Well, of course we're pumped!" Lily protested with both her hands as fists.

"After all, [Tomoshihi] isn't a temporary team anymore, but admitted as an official team! We want to make our first official mission a success, so we're working hard!" Lily jumped up in excitement.

After that, she called out to the girls still caught in the table cloth.

"Everyone else agrees with me, right?"

"We're ready!"

"It's time to show the results of our training!"

Apparently, the break did work wonders, because their voices were brimming with energy. However, Ron couldn't help but slightly shake his head.

"The first mission was already cleared though?"

"Huh?"

"Three missions inside the Kingdom of Lairat, as well as two others here in Deen. I took care of all of them, so next would actually be the 6th mission."

“.....” The girls’ faces all shared the same blank expression. You could hear the sounds of their hearts breaking, finding out that the long-awaited first mission had already passed them by. Ron just gave a nonchalant *In the meantime, focus on your training*, picked up an apple from the table, and walked out of the dining room. The third important characteristic of his—he was always going at his own pace.

In the face of that, the girls were left behind without any words. All they could do were exchange gazes with the others, trying to grasp what just happened. Finally, they arrived at the conclusion that [We were not even invited to our own mission]—

""""""""Hold on a damn second!!!""""""""

They screamed at Ron' back in anger.

"You cleared it on your own? In that short amount of time?"

Inside a single room of the Cabinet Office, an attractive older man with grey hair let out a sigh. Normally, he would always keep a sharp gaze no matter who stood in front of him, but the person he was dealing with now in consideration, he couldn't help but be perplexed. Pushing up his hair, streaked with grey, he looked at the documents in front of him.

This happened inside the Office of Foreign Intelligence. Though it sounded like an openly accessible room, it was equipped with quite the formidable security, a durable room. Accepted by an employee of the Cabinet Office, you would take the elevator with the key given to you, and after entering the password, you finally made it to the room. Found on the red carpet were a simple table and sofa, and greeting you was but a single man.

“...It’s hard to believe, but knowing it was you, it certainly doesn’t sound impossible.”

The man, called C by everyone, pressed down on his forehead. He acted as the leading chairman.

"You finally managed to form a proper team with the girls, so why didn't you take them with you?"

"Because they are still lacking." Ron gave an immediate answer.

He was seated on a chair, drinking the coffee made by the chairman. It was as horrible as always.

"I want them to gather experience. That being said, we're not talking about normal salarymen here. As if I could take them to a mission, as inexperienced as they are."

"But, you already cleared a mission with them?"

"That was an exception. I couldn't have cleared that mission without their strength."

Having anticipated that he was betrayed by that man, he judged that mission to be impossible with his own strength. It was a choice that couldn't be helped. However, the missions this time around were easy enough for

him to clear them on his own. If he took the girls with him, they would be met with unnecessary danger.

"Naturally, I admit their talent. Eventually, I will have them participate. However, they are not ready yet."

Ron will carry the responsibility of not bringing them back to the educational facility. He would teach them, polish them, and make them proper spies all by himself. However, he had to be cautious.

"...It'd be great if things wouldn't stay forever like that."

"That sounds like you mean to tell me something?"

"It sounds like a fault you'd make." The chairman gave a sharp gaze towards Ron.

Still, Ron remained as calm as ever.

"Then, do you have a mission for us that fits?"

"A mission that fits?"

"With the risks as low as possible, something where they can gather experience."

"As if I'd have something this convenient."

"Then I'd like to keep them away from missions for now. I finished all the work you needed me to, right? During the next few weeks, I'd like to focus on training the girls a bit. I also have to gather some information about [Hebi] as well."

"You should know best that things don't work like that."

The chairman piled up a mountain of files on the table. From the looks of it, they were enough to fill a few books, most likely missions waiting for Ron.

"....." He just silently gazed at them.

"Your expression couldn't be more blatant."

"I was supposed to be given a month off."

"Your facial color has worsened dramatically after all." The chairman strained his expression. "But, you must understand it as well, right. Even in these few minutes we're talking here, the Empire is snuggling in despicable spies, invading our country."

"....."

"They corrupt the government, steal our inventions, disregarding the peaceful lives of our citizens. Our comrades are trying their hardest to close off any intruders, invading the enemy lands to gather information, and losing their lives. The loss of [Homura] has brought grave consequences to our country."

The moment the name of [Homura] popped up, Ron found trouble talking back. That was probably the reason why the chairman used this card. Following that, the man put yet another stack of files on the desk.

"Especially with this mission—you're the only one who can clear it."

Said documents were as high as a mountain, sealed away by black pair and string. Ron could tell from just that, that this would be a bothersome mission.

"I fully understand that [Tomoshihi] is still inexperienced, and that you can't help going on missions alone right now."

"....."

"That being said, this world, riddled with pain, cannot wait for the growth of your team."

"....."

"Stop keeping quiet just to emphasize your discomfort."

Ron took the files into his hands, softly flipping the pages. The number of them closed in onto the 100. Arriving at the last page after around ten seconds, he ripped them apart.

The chairman watched this with a sharp gaze. "You mean to reject it?"

"It's just as you can see." Ron answered calmly.

"What is?"

"I remembered it."

To that, the chairman had his expression change ever so slightly, now with a glimmer of astonishment. At the same time, Ron sighed.

"I can only accept it, right? In order to protect the citizens that [Homura] adored so much."

He had been taught by his teacher countless times. If they were circumstances not easy to swallow, one had to cut away the personal feelings hindering oneself from accepting it. Because only spies are the ones who can change the world—

By the time he returned back to the Kagerou Palace, the sun had set. Since the Cabinet Office was a good ways away from the Palace, it always took quite some time to get there and back. All the lights were out besides the ones at the entrance, so Ron guessed the girls were already sound asleep, because the time announced it to be 11pm. Girls nowadays were quick to sleep, maybe because these ones in particular were practicing by themselves as well. After all, several spy tools Ron could see in the reception room.

The second he arrived at his own room to loosen the necktie of his suit, he heard a knock.

"Boss, I have brought you some black tea..."

It was a quiet, calm voice. Opening the door, he was greeted by a girl carrying a tray with a teapot on top. She had her red hair in a bob cut, her body slender so much you'd be worried about her health, with equally slim limbs. She was as fragile as glass, ready to break if one used one wrong grab on her. Her name—Grete.

"Thanks. But, there was no need to get up this late just to make some tea for me."

"If it's for the Boss, then..."

"I keep telling you, don't call me like that."

It didn't allow Ron to calm down. Inside his head, there was only one person with the 'Boss' for him. That was the boss of the last generation of

[Homura], with the codename [Kouro]. However, Grete would not respond to these words, just starting her preparations for the tea. She poured the tea into the cup she had brought with her. Though Ron subconsciously checked if there was poison inside, he knew there couldn't be, as she apparently really did this out of goodwill.

She wasn't even a maid living in this house, but every time Ron tried to explain it, she would not lend him an ear.

"...At the place where I spend my holidays, I found a flavory black tea, so I wanted Boss to try it."

"It does seem that way. Wasn't it expensive?"

"...It was an easy price in order to please the Boss."

"I see, thanks for that."

Ron was patiently watching the girl finishing the preparations. Naturally, this wasn't the first time she had acted this way towards him. Even in the middle of the previous mission, she would show herself yearning for Ron. *I don't get it. Did I do something that would induce any affection on her end?*

Why would she be this close to him? He thought back—to the day her attitude towards him changed.

It was a dramatic event—Well, maybe not as much, but it still left quite the impression on Ron. It was right before their departure to retrieve the biological weapon. Faced with such a crucial mission, Ron was training as usual. Meeting a slight warm-up with playfulness, he disguised as someone else, and came to the Kagerou Palace under the setting of being 'A colleague of Ron'. Towards the girls, who didn't pick up on this at all, he gave them false information in the words of *If you give Ron some high-grade wine, he will get drunk easily*, and even got testimony from Lily that she was stealing the canned food of his day and night to snack on them. He was wondering why he was starting to miss some, but that explained a lot. After successfully deceiving them, he took off his disguise, and went to take a shower. With unfamiliar clothes, a bit of sweat had gathered on his body. Inside the Kagerou Palace existed a big open bath, as well as a normal shower room. The former was for the girls, whereas Ron would always be using the shower room.

Naturally, he immediately picked up that someone was using the room at that very moment. For a second, he pondered if he should knock or not, reaching out with his hand, but ultimately stopped himself. There was no need for the girls to use the normal shower room. Hence, this must be a plot of attack. Then, it would be most polite to act like he didn't catch on. Thinking like that, he opened the door, only to be greeted by Grete—Fully naked.

"Hm?"

"Eh?"



The girl reacted fairly quickly, grabbing a towel and crouched down. However, she was too late. Ron had already seen her entire appearance, not covered by anything. Her snow white skin, or her long, slender legs. Even the parts she was normally hiding had been free to Ron's eyes for a brief moment. Reflexively, he even muttered a short *Beautiful*.

"Quite the bold seductive strategy. I will praise you for your courage." Ron showed admiration, as he readied himself for an attack.

However, no matter how long he waited, no other girl appeared.

"...Boss." Grete still tightly embraced her body with the towel as she grew teary-eyed, her slender shoulders shaking.

Something was off. He reacted immediately, and dashed out of the changing room. Ever since that day, Grete's attitude towards him had changed.

...Yeah, thinking back to it, there was no reason for her to develop any positive affection towards me.

Albeit being an accident, he still had seen her naked, so he expected her to hold a grudge, or something comparable. Like their relationship turning awkward, for example. However, why did the exact opposite of that happen? Was it about the responsibility he had to bear for seeing her naked? If so, then this was quite the old-fashioned idea.

"Your return today had been awfully late...Will you be able to take it slow tomorrow?"

Before Ron could arrive at anything resembling an answer, Grete spoke up.

"No, I doubt it. I had to accept another big mission, and I was ordered to rewrite the report as well."

"Rewrite...? Why would you have to?"

"The missions I accept often have been attempted by someone else, and failed. Hence, I have to state my strategy and plans on how to clear it this time around. And report how I actually cleared it"

"That's the Boss for you..."

"Last time I told them 'I just managed to clear it', they were giving me these 'Stop joking around' gazes."

"Ahhh..." Grete let out a voice like she could sympathize with them.

That was the exact field Ron didn't excel at. He found himself unable to properly explain his own actions. Just like people cannot properly put into words on how they put on a shirt, or close their buttons, he has the same problem, but with anything related to being a spy. This was the reason for the rather unorthodox lesson of his, which tasked the girls to defeat him, with whatever method needed.

Naturally, he portrayed the rough details and the bare minimum of information in his reports. However, most of these things contain his weird explanations, or his personal feelings. That is how he went on doing his job. In other words, he won't be getting any break anytime soon.

Eventually, Grete spoke up, slightly hesitant.

"Boss..."

"What is it?"

"If you are fine with it, please let me hug you."

"As if I'd be fine with it."

What kind of proposition was that? However, Grete didn't pay any mind to Ron's words, and just opened her arms wide.

"No need to be embarrassed...please let me spoil you to your heart's content."

"Did you hit your head or something?"

Ron wondered if her comrades hammered some weird knowledge into her.

"Let me just ask you, is this some lesson on seduction?"

"No, I have not the slightest desire to deceive you, Boss..." The girl cast her face downward, slightly disappointed.

"I just...wanted you to be able to take a break..."

"A break?"

"...The success of our previous mission was mostly because of the Boss. Not to mention that you are taking care of our education all on your own, whilst still departing on other missions..."

With 'previous mission', she probably referred to the recovery of the biological weapon. Though it all went according to plan, the girls were still overwhelmed by the enemy. The difference between them and a first-rate spy was still too big, so they had to act as the decoys, whereas Ron basically took care of everything himself.

"Exhaustion, et cetera..." Grete swallowed her breath. "It all must be pent up..."

She was clearly emphasizing the 'et cetera' part. Ron judged not to touch it for now.

"I'm happy for your thoughtfulness, but I'd like you to focus on your training for now. Meaning, to come attack me whenever"

"! An invitation for a nightly raid...!" Grete's voice grew higher in tone.

Ron pinched his brow.

"Grete, the next time you come to my room, bring someone else with you."

"! Several at once...!"

"I can't retort all of this on my own."

Yet again, Ron realized that there were too many odd folks in his team.

Checking that Grete had truly left, he let out a sigh. All that's left of her was the teapot, the contents filled to the brim. She brought it in at the perfect time when Ron felt a bit thirsty. Almost as if she had seen right through his desires. If you didn't have a schooled eye for surveillance, you wouldn't be able to tell. Inside the room, filled with the scent of the black tea, Ron thought about the words of Grete.

Fatigue, huh...

The chairman had mentioned that Ron had started to look a bit pale, but his words couldn't be trusted. Rather, he should be following the worried words of the girl who admired him. As a test, he touched his cheek with his fingers. It was missing a lot of its normal tension, most likely because his

muscles were exhausted. Even for Ron, who used his facial muscles much less than a normal human.

Maybe I really should take a bit of rest. But—

Ron directed his gaze over at the wall. A certain weapon had been displayed there. It was a tool too flashy and gaudy to be used by a spy, an oriental product. The blade bent a bit, and if it was used by a master, it could turn into a weapon with great lethality.

A katana, previously used by his teacher, Guido. Right now though, it was nothing more than a memento.

—You have to protect them. This time, for sure.

Those were his words. The man had been like a father, like a trusted friend, and above all, family.

Rather than worrying about myself, I should probably prioritize their own growth...

What remained in the back of his head was the mission handed to him by the chairman.

‘Assassinate an assassin—that is your next mission.’

Together with that, Ron received information about a politician. In this world, it happens very frequently that politicians die a sudden death, the cause being falling from a high place. Though there are suicide notes found most of the time, there is always a high chance that this was forged, and that they were forced into suicide.

‘The name of the target is [Shikabane]—or so I called them. Apparently, they look like an actual corpse.’

Quite the exaggeration of a name.

‘Here in the Republic of Deen, around two weeks ago, a politician had passed away. Death by falling from a high place, so we figured it might be the work of [Shikabane] again, invading our peaceful country.’ Like you would sigh at a kid’s prank, the chairmandid, and continued. ‘This is the information the first division has gathered about [Shikabane], so take it with you, and put it to good use.’

Ron nodded to that. He already figured what was going to come next.

‘The comrades that have acquired this information were all killed. The ones following them were killed as well. Meaning, this has been categorized as an Impassable Mission.’

A mission which had been judged impossible after consecutive attempts, an Impassable Mission. Not to mention there was more, as Ron was looking through the documents.

‘Additionally, we have judged this Impassable Mission to be even more dangerous than your previous one.’

Ron could only nod along.

‘Excellent comrades had been slaughtered in the process. This has to be a first-rate assassin without a doubt, and they must have allies that assist in their murders. Additionally, we are aware that information about you has

been leaked to the Empire. If you were to openly act, [Shikabane] would certainly vanish.'

And finally, the chairman said the words Ron didn't want to hear.

'Have the girls participate. Your strength alone will not be enough for this.'

Reminiscing about the scene back at the Office of Foreign Intelligence, Ron sighed. He let all the information that he read run through his head once more, building up a plan. The chairman wasn't bluffing. The scale might be smaller, but the pure difficulty of the mission was definitely higher than retrieving the biological weapon. He had to prepare himself for a rather relentless situation. However, the problem lies elsewhere—Should he really have the girls participate?

No, they might be killed by [Shikabane]...I alone should challenge this mission.

He was fairly confident that he could win in terms of battling, predicting, or deceiving the enemy. That being said, no matter how much confidence Ron might have had, he only had one body. He would be unable to counter various risks, fully protecting the girls in case of any emergency.

If they had grown a bit more, things might have been different, but...

An empty wish. Exactly because he acted as their instructor, he knew that this wasn't possible. Not to mention that he would have wished to gather a bit more information before giving the final decision, but—

'Before that, I have another mission for you.'

He had been given yet another on top of the Impassable Mission.

That damned old fox.

Ron spit an insult at the chairman. He must have been a monster when he was still in active service, possessing these birds of prey eyes, seeing right through a target. He probably judged that Ron could finish the one mission early, and then take care of [Shikabane]. Only more problems that worked in heightening his fatigue.

The following morning after he was given the mission, the girls had prepared a trap for him. Right as he stepped outside onto the hallway, a puppy greeted him, who had been picked up by one of the girls. Apparently, he had run away, or so Ron thought, as he reached out for him with his hand, when the puppy pulled his body back, running away.

Chasing the puppy for a bit, Ron made it to a storage room, where five girls were already waiting in assault.

"This isn't even worth my time."

Naturally, he easily overwhelmed them. As he wanted to leave the storage room, he realized that a trap was set up at the doorknob. Needles would come from his dead angles. If he wasn't careful, they would hit him in various places. Putting a handkerchief on his fingers, he picked one up, and saw something dripping from the tip. Poison—and, there was only one poison user in the team.

"Lily, is this your doing?"

Following his words, Ron heard a suspicious 'Hyan' voice from across the door. Said door opened for a bit, and Lily showed her face.

"Y-You found out...? I was aiming for a trap the second you relaxed a bit—" "Too simple." Ron returned the poisoned needles to the girl. "Trained spies are sensitive to any ill-will. Even if it wasn't me, a normal spy would also pick up on that."

"Hmpf, I really thought I was getting better..."

"In the sense that you're not forgetting the antidote anymore, maybe?"

"Hehe! Out of the last times, I only forgot it once!"

So she still has times where she forgets it, huh. Hearing this, Ron once again felt anxious about letting her participate in a mission.

"Also," Ron tapped on the girl's shoulders. "Come with me for a second."

Pulling the bewildered girl after him, Ron left the site where the Kagerou Palace stood. Entering a car he had parked in the corner of the town, he had Lily sit down on the passenger seat. Starting the car, they both headed to the highway. On the way, there was something he had to check at any costs.

"Eh, what is going on? Being so pushy...is this one of those so-called drive dates—"

"Do you girls want to participate in a mission?" Ron cut right through Lily's fantasy.

Arriving at the highway, Ron spoke up when there were no other people or cars around anymore.

"I figured I'd ask you before I gave the final call. How are you all feeling right now?"

"I mean, of course we want to participate." Lily scratched her cheek, slightly embarrassed at her misunderstanding. "The big premise of it is that I don't want to die though. Everyone is working hard to become better spies, all so that we can defeat you. In the end, I want to be a renowned spy, which will be left behind in the records of the world."

"I see."

"And, with no rewards for our success, the salary will be..."

"No need to worry about that. With the missions I successfully clear, you won't be starving."

"Eh? So then we can just slack off for—ouch?!"

One hand still on the steering wheel, Ron flicked his fingers at the girl's forehead.

"Was all that talk just now nothing but void blabbering?"

"But! Just by doing nothing, merely sleeping all day long, we'd get lots of money, treated as famous spies, so why is there a need to work hard then!"

"Don't get swept along your desires."

"But—in order to have all of this granted, I still want to challenge missions."

Lily muttered, dropping the volume of her voice. "We are all spies. So we want to change the world."

Her frivolous tone had vanished from her voice, exchanged with sincere feelings. She was different from the time she just carelessly joked around after being appointed as the leader. Her profile alone gave off a strong sense of duty and obligation residing inside of her.

“—Marvelous.”

Finally, the two of them arrived at a rural city, near the royal capital and the port city. There existed a railway connecting the two cities, frequented often by the citizens, which accounted for around several tens of thousands. Though the scale was still on the smaller end, several commercial buildings stood high near the train station.

“We’ll discuss the rest after the mission is over.”

Once Ron stepped out of the car, and said those words, Lily’s face lit up.

“Exactly. You will walk around the town for around one hour, buying drinks, and come back after.”

“Understood. And, what after that?”

“We’ll be going home.”

“Eh?” Lily’s mouth opened wide.

“I’m more than enough to take care of this mission.”

The reason he took Lily with him was to have a calm conversation with her. Recently, talking calmly inside the Kagerou Palace was not a thing.

“That’s not a mission, I’m just an errand girl!”

Fully ignoring Lily’s discomfort, Ron bound up his hair behind his head, and got into a more serious mood, befitting the mission.

The mission he received from the chairman was to unmask spies hiding inside the country. The goal here was simple. Using the information gathered by another spy team, he had to arrest the target. That being said, the enemy was a trained spy. Assisting a politician who was speaking well of the Empire with funds, and planning to disturb the creation of another harbour. Ron’s comrades were trying to arrest him two times now, but he escaped both times.

His current hideout was a single room in a shared-living house. Ron arrived in the disguise of a waterways worker, but the enemy had already been prepared for an attack, probably because of a previous mistake from his comrades. The room Ron arrived at was riddled with traps, most likely aiming to capture Ron instead, getting some information out of him. Making it past the traps, Ron engaged with the enemy.

Luckily, the surroundings allowed for a smooth battle. The two rooms next to this one were not occupied. According to the caretaker, the residents were all out on trips, so they could fight to their heart’s content. Using the fighting tactics and knowledge hammered into him by his teacher, Ron swiftly took care of him.

“Do you have any allies in this town?” Ron asked, his knife directly at the enemy’s throat.

“.....” The male spy didn’t dare to answer.

“Guess not. That’s good to know.”

“...!”

Guessing from the man’s reaction, there didn’t seem to be any allies of his in this town.

“Just to let you know, your allies scattered through the area have already been arrested. So no need to even try and hide it.”

The arresting of hostile spies in the country would always go by fast. They wouldn’t even allow for any information to leak, not giving the enemy a chance to run away.

“How did you know I was coming to attack you? Most likely...I see.”

The man still had his lips tightly shut, but his expression revealed everything, clearing up all the doubts Ron had. And with this, the mission was cleared.

Ron contacted his allies, tying up the man. Changing back into his suit, he left the room again. The clean-up will be done by another team. All that Ron had to do was finish the paperwork. However, something didn’t fit right with him, as he looked down at his own hand.

My muscles feel heavy...

The man, having been backed into a corner, had tried to drink poison. Despite it being a small amount, it would have been enough to lose an important source of information. From the looks of it, the continuous days of working without a break finally showed the results.

We don’t have much time, but maybe to make up for bringing Lily here, we could go to a restaurant and—

Right as he started thinking that, it happened.

—The sound of explosions.

Closely following that, a scream. He heard them from the town, and reflexively lifted up his head. In this rural area, there existed various gangs, but he didn’t receive any information of gang wars happening at the time. A runaway enemy spy causing chaos? But, the one Ron just caught should not have any allies around...

The sound of a gunshot followed. But more importantly, the source of that scream sounded to be Lily. Did she get wrapped up in something?

One thing after the other...can’t even blame this on my fatigue...

Luckily, he was perfectly prepared. Gun and phone ready in his hands, he had other spy tools on him. The other person was just unlucky now.

You’ll regret putting your hands on my comrades.

Ron muttered inside his heart, as he ran towards the scene.

To his luck, the sound of the explosion didn’t inflict much fear into the residents. Thinking of this as weird, he ran into decommissioned police vehicles on the way, with the tyres flat. Most likely, the sounds of explosions actually belonged to the tires popping after being shot, and the police immediately acted against the perpetrator, so the town was as calm as ever. However, there was no mistaking it that Ron just heard gunshots. Someone was leading the police around for some unknown reason. When Ron made

his way over to the location of the scream he heard, Lily was in a wide open place, sitting on the ground.

—With blood leaking from her arm.

She had her back to a metal barrel, doing some first-aid treatment on her right arm. She had cut a bit of her skirt away to use it as a bandage. The drops of sweat running down her cheeks and neck were enough to tell of her pain. When Ron approached her, the girl directed her gaze deeper towards the alley.

“Sensei! I’m fine! Go south from here, there is a man wearing a beige coat!” Apparently, she had suffered quite the deep wound. A pool of blood was building at her legs. Though Ron wanted to ask what exactly happened, just as she said, chasing after the perpetrator had a higher priority.

Just who is it...?

Ron thought to himself as he ran down the alley. It was a back-alley with no people around, no people passing him. He couldn’t find the man with the coat either, so he must have run away already.

Closing his eyes, Ron focussed on his ears. As a result, he heard the footsteps of two people. That being said, they didn’t sound like they were in a rush, or in a panic. Ron could tell, instinctively. He heard them at a place far away, and the second he entered onto the main street, they mixed in with the other footsteps around. Following them any more with his hearing ability would prove difficult. Using the wires at his disposal, he put them on the roofs, and jumped up to get a better view. Yet, he still couldn’t find any man wearing a beige coat. Neither of any man making it seem like he was running away, or being wary of being tailed.

So he got away...? No, something is wrong here.

He couldn’t tell as to why that was, so he could only give up. Returning to the place Lily rested at, she had already finished her first-aid treatment, a bandage around her arm, and her sweating in better control.

“Ah, Sensei. What about the enemy?” She sounded awfully calm.

“Apologies. He managed to escape.”

“Eh? From Sensei?”

“I’m happy about your trust in me, but the location and situation was too unfortunate.”

Though it felt like he was just making excuses, it couldn’t be helped this time. At the time the attack happened, he was still too far away. The enemy had all the time to run away until Ron even made it to Lily.

“.....”

That being said, the girl herself still looked a bit suspicious.

“What? Are you that disappointed?”

“Ah, no, it’s just...you were chasing after the enemy with such confidence that this is a big unexpected.”

“With such confidence?”

Did he really show such an attitude? If so, then this really was embarrassing.

“—No, enough of that. First, we have to take care of your wound.”

“Ah, that’s right.”

Ron decided to ask Lily for details later. Not to mention that the Office for Foreign Intelligence might have any information on this. If this was in any way related to [Shikabane], that alone would be an interesting development —

However, it happened right as he started dwelling in his thoughts, walking towards the hospital.

“Hoi!” A voice rang out.

Turning around, an unbelievable scenery opened up before Ron’s eyes. He was unable to grasp it. Why something like this was even possible.

Lily had stabbed a poisonous needle right into Ron’s arm.

Not to mention with the arm that had supposedly been wounded. A chill ran down his spine. Only for that to vanish immediately, as his body started to burn up, sweat building up. Most likely as an effect of the poisonous needles. It worked as fast as ever; The secret poison, created by the specialist [Hanazono] Lily—

“Why...?” Ron asked, with trembling lips.

“Eh? Weren’t you the one who told me?” Lily tilted her head, visibly confused. ““The next time we meet, stab me with a sedative-filled needle’, right?”

Ron didn’t have any memory of ever saying that.

“Sedative...?”

“I mean, there was blood coming out from your right arm, Sensei...”

Blood? That couldn’t be. Lily had been the one who was bleeding from her right arm. However, Ron was unable to listen to any more words, as he leaned against Lily, unable to put any more strength into his legs. His vision was spinning. Lily raised a voice in surprise, catching Ron. She looked pale, almost as if she had hurt her own ally. Seeing this, Ron finally found the reason for his discomfort.

“—Marvelous.” Grabbing Lily’s arm, he spit out these words.

Just as expected, he wouldn’t find any wound on her arm.

“I see...what a wonderful method. After the firing of the gun, the Lily who had shown me her wound, and the Lily right here are two different people.”

“Huh...?”

“On top of that, the me right here, and the Ron with the wound, ordering you to ‘Stab me with your needle’, are also two different people.” Thinking about it, there could be only one conclusion.

“There are two of us.”

What a wonderful trick. The enemy became Ron, showing the wound on his right arm, having Lily let out a shriek. Following that, he gave some vague explanation, and an order in the way of ‘Put a bandage around your right arm, and when we meet again, stab me with your needle, sedative on it’.

With that, the enemy gave Lily a perfect order, which would explain why she thought that Ron sounded full of confidence. Following that, the enemy changed into Lily next, meeting with the real Ron.

With this perfectly thought-out plan, and this unrivaled use of disguises, there could only be one person able to pull this off.

“...It is just as you suspect.” A calm and collected voice.

Ron mustered up the rest of his strength to turn around. Standing there was yet another Lily. Taking off the blood at her right arm, she smiled.

“Boss is always sensitive to traps...you would immediately pick up on any ill-intent or bloodlust emitting from someone...”

She had most likely seen what had happened this morning. The sight of Ron disarming the trap on the doorknob.

“Hence, I controlled Lily, and had her stab you with a needle **out of pure goodwill.**” The other Lily said, as she slowly put her fingers on her face.

“Codename [Manamusume³]³—Let us spend this time lamenting in laughter.”

Together with her naming herself, she pulled off the mask that looked like Lily. Appearing beneath that was the face of a very familiar red-haired girl—The disguise specialist, Grete.

In the world of spies, the works of disguises could be found everywhere. Everybody could wear a normal disguise with the use of wigs, sunglasses, and make-up. That being said, disguising oneself as another existing person was on a whole other level. There were dimensions in difficulty between that. First, one had to prepare a mask made with rosin, put color on it, and fleshing it out.

What was needed next was an excellent skill and sense of perception. One had to perfectly copy the gestures, voice, and every small movement of the other person, something even first-rate spies often found themselves in trouble with. However, as Ron was gathering members for [Tomoshibi], he heard stories from a certain educational facility.

—That there was a girl skilled at creating disguises, however unable to properly show her true skill.

No matter how you think about it, she’s clearly showing that skill right here. Ron cursed at the mistaken information he had received. Just to let this be clear, Ron did not give her any extra guidance or training. Though he didn’t know what kind of circumstances she had been dealing with, she could have overcome that now, or maybe the eyes of the instructor back at the facility were just rotten beyond belief.

“At last, I finally cornered you.” Grete showed a gleeful smile.

In her hand, she had the wig and mask she just pulled off. Every time Ron observed her skill, he was left in awe once again. Just now, she had acted as a perfect Lily. Her outer appearance, her voice, and even her gestures, she had managed to create a perfect copy.

And her disguise wasn't the only reason she managed to deceive Ron like that, there was also the wound, and the blood being too realistic. Then again, the blood was probably the real deal, as it gave off this rusty, metallic scent. However, it was most likely from a blood transfusion, rather than her own. Even Ron wouldn't be able to stay perfectly reasonable after seeing an ally bleed like that, and the girl used that for her own good.

"....."

Acting his discomfort and powerlessness, he carefully reached out to Lily's uniform with his hand. If the information she had given him this morning was correct, then she should carry an antidote.

"There's no antidote anymore."

However, a commanding voice behind Ron cut right through his movement.

"—I stole it already."

From the back-alley, another girl appeared. She was yet another member of [Tomoshibi], the white-haired girl Zibia. Just as she had announced, no matter where Ron checked, he couldn't find an antidote.

Following Zibia, even more girls appeared. Holding weapons in their hands, they surrounded Ron. All eight of the girls had gathered now in this alley. That would explain the calm sounds of footsteps Ron heard in the main street just now.

"That's Grete's plan for you."

"The great me agrees! That was an amazing idea!"

They all went to praise the red-haired girl, making it obvious that this had been her idea from the start. The only person bewildered at this situation was Lily.

"Eh. I didn't hear any of this though?"

"...If we told you about this, you would have leaked it to the Boss."

"It pains me to say it, but I can't argue against that at all...!"

All Lily could do was softly help Ron sit down on the ground. Him sitting on the stone pavement, the other girls went to surround him, showing victorious grins. Almost as if they had been waiting for this. The only one who was different had been Grete.

"A groveling Boss is also very charming...A lap pillow might fit you..."

Ron shook his head.

"I didn't expect you to be this sadistic."

"I guessed that you were a masochist."

"I didn't tell you to 'attack me' in that kind of way."

"You've driven yourself too much into a corner." Grete started. "If you were in top-form, you would have seen the hurt Lily-san, and realized it was a disguise right away."

"....."

"Ever since you lost [Homura] three months ago, you achieved so many things. You created the new team [Tomoshibi], threw away any type of possible break in exchange for offering us these special lessons, and you

even cleared the Impassable Mission. And even after that, you were going on missions on your own for our sake as well."

"No need to worry, I'm used to it."

"When was the last time you took an actual break...? Ten days ago? Or a full hundred days ago?"

Grete gave off a pressure that didn't allow Ron to hide anything. Before he lost [Homura], he had been on a separate mission as well, so counting the days would lead up to—

"465 days ago."

""""Woah...""""

A few of the girls' reactions overlapped. The time here stacked up to around 15 months. Not taking a break for a single day, he had been out on missions.

"Are you an idiot or something?" Zibia retorted without restraint.

Grete just sighed to that.

"...That's too much. A normal person would spit blood and collapse."

Following Grete's words, the other girls chimed in.

"You can depend on us from time to time."

"Relax, and take a break."

Though they were simple words, they possessed a lot of value. From the looks of it, the girls were also questioning this current situation. That is why they showed their current skill and techniques, to give Ron a peace of mind.

"....." Ron couldn't come up with any answer.

"Don't try to carry everything on your own..." Grete smiled. "You have us now, so let us spoil you from time to time." She took out a gun from her chest pocket, a small automatic handgun. "Now, admit defeat..." She softly put the muzzle of the gun at Ron's forehead. "—And then, please take a good rest in my chest from this evening onward." Her smile was filled with kindness.

Her eyes were filled with overflowing warmth, like a goddess had descended onto earth. Ron just calmly lifted his arms, showing no resistance.

"I've understood your feelings."

Grete's cheeks softened up. "Yes..."

"I have to admit, I might be tired. Ever since we cleared that Impassable Mission, I didn't take a single day of rest. Especially during these last two weeks, I had to embark on consecutive missions, and if I was at home, I had to take care of your lessons. Even I will eventually run out of steam, and this situation probably came into place because of that."

"Indeed. That's why—"

"But, there is one thing I was wondering." Ron announced.

"How long do I have to play along with this child's play?"

"Eh..."

Like he was crawling on the ground, Ron fell forwards. At the same time as the muzzle of the gun grew separated from him, he widened his long legs,

sweeping Grete's legs. This happening in a split second, Grete couldn't react in time, not to mention that she wasn't the combat type to begin with. Before she could even fix her posture, the situation took a complete 180 turn.

Now, Ron' spear hand was right at her throat.

"—Marvelous."

If she moved only a bit, his nails would pierce her carotid artery. To threaten her into believing this, he put his fingers on her neck. Meanwhile, the other girls could only watch in silence.

"A poisonous needle with no ill-intent...I will praise you for coming up with a plan like that."

The poison had vanished from his body. While he continued the conversation, he had recovered.

"I'm sorry..." Lily muttered in an apologetic tone. "I couldn't fully stab him with the needle...Because I grazed him, a bit of it got inside of him, but not nearly enough to completely reach the veins..."

She did not deserve any critique for this misstep. After all, she was used just as much as Ron was. Grete heard this, and her eyes opened wide.

"How did you..." Her tongue didn't move properly "There is no way you could have anticipated this..."

"But I did." Ron removed his fingers from her neck. "Just as you said, a skilled spy would always be sensitive to any ill-will or bloodlust. No mistaking it that an attack out of goodwill would be highly effective. That being said, with all these suspicious fragments happening before, the puzzle became unclear, and I heightened my guard."

"Suspicious fragments...?"

"The way you cleared out the people was too blatant."

Ron softly flicked Grete's hand, making her drop the gun. He picked that up, and softly turned it inside his hand. The other girls around showed no signs of wanting to interfere. Because they must have understood already—That they had no hopes of winning against Ron now that he had recovered.

"As for the reason, it was just a hunch. But, the suspicious fragments were there in mass." He continued his explanation. "I found Lily in the middle of an alley, at a place where she would stand out, with a pool of blood at her legs like that. No mistaking it that she had been there for a long time. Yet, nobody but I had caught on to her. You gave the citizens and police the impressions of gunshots as you popped the tires of the cars, making them stay away from that location. It was all done too well for a coincidence. Though I didn't know what goal there had been in all of that, it was obvious that the enemy tried to deceive me."

After all, the gunshot sounds had reached Ron this far away, all to lead him to a place with no citizens or police around. However, he spotted the shot tires on the way, and grew suspicious. The only one who spotted the hurt Lily was her teacher, who had given his students a certain special training.

At that moment, Ron judged that the enemy's goal was himself. Naturally, that's all he found out because of a small whim.

"Catching on to any blatant fragments like that, you'll grow conscious." Ron continued. "—This is exactly what the spy I fought today did as well."

The enemy spy had felt that something was off since both neighbours were off to travel at the same time. It was a floppy way of clearing out people, and for that, Ron got annoyed at his allies. Now that the girls had done the exact same fault, there was only one thing Ron could say, as he gazed at each and every girl.

"Hence, if I let you girls take care of the mission today, you would have been killed."

The girls awkwardly averted their gazes. Lastly, he looked over at Grete. Though she didn't turn her head away, the vigor from just now had vanished fully.

"I have no doubt that there is potential slumbering in each and every one of you, and this will bloom eventually. That being said, your current skill is lacking."

And he wasn't done.

"As of right now, I cannot rely on you."

Leaving the girls behind, Ron stepped out of the alley.

That night, Ron was inside his room, sighing audibly.

Taking them on a mission is still too dangerous...

Looking at the results of today, he could only arrive at this conclusion.

Even if it might prove impossible for me alone, I cannot take them with me...

That was the most reasonable choice. Although it might be harsh of him, challenging [Shikabane] most likely worked best alone.

Leading a new team really is tough work...

That realization took a lot of Ron. Although the day had ended, tons of work was still left over. And in the midst of that were missions only he as the world's strongest can take care of. Though he felt the exhaustion slowly creeping up to him, who would become his replacement and lose their life instead?

So many problems left...

—A continuous stream of fairly dangerous missions.

—His subordinates, who weren't exactly making the biggest progress, and keeping them safe.

—The continuous growth of fatigue befalling him with each passing day.

—The closing in of the Impassable Mission 'Assassinating an Assassin'.

This is what he got after looking down upon creating a team by himself. He couldn't ask his teacher or the previous boss anymore. He had lost his comrades. Being a first-rate spy, as well as an instructor at the same time, how should he balance those two.

I lost everyone from [Homura]. Even if I were to ruin myself, nobody would...

Starting his thought, Ron closed his eyes out of a whim—
Before he even realized it, he was dozing off. Leaning against the back of his chair, he gave in. How long has it been since he had slept in a place different from his bed? He felt like he was back to being a young man still. Back then, he had slept on the sofa inside the reception hall after a long day of training.

Right as he subconsciously wished to go back to those days, he shook his head. The world's strongest spy couldn't be someone weak like that. He would be nothing but a joke.

What pulled Ron up even further to his consciousness was the kind of smell of leaves.

"...Grete?"

"I have brought you the daily tea..."

Standing next to the desk was Grete, holding a tray with the teapot on top.

"I have prepared a herb tea that would allow for a smooth sleep, but it seems like I woke you up instead..."

"No, it doesn't matter. I was just taking a quick nap."

"Thank you very much for joining our lesson this afternoon...We just finished our reflection meeting on that..." Grete explained, as she smoothly poured tea into the cup she prepared.

She could have used this chance to attack him. Yet, she apparently had her own policies. Additionally, there didn't seem to be any poison in her tea. Grete finished her work by putting the cup in front of Ron, and opened up both her arms.

"...Now, if I could just finish it off with an embrace—"

"No need."

Ron thankfully accepted the tea, and the tea alone. Naturally, Grete didn't appreciate this at all, with a lonely puppy gaze, but Ron skillfully ignored that.

"You really don't shake at all." Ron had to praise her for her efforts.

He assumed her to have given up after what happened this afternoon, but her approach would not waver. She had waited for the time he would wake up, preparing tea for his dry throat.

"Let me ask straight." Ron wanted to make sure of it now. "Do you have romantic feelings for me?"

".....!" Grete's shoulders shook.

She almost let the tray she kept holding on fall to the floor, barely catching it again.

"Tha...that's the Boss for you." Her eyes opened wide. "...I'm surprised you realized that."

"Were you trying to hide it?"

"....."

After a long silence, Grete softly muttered.

"...Just as planned."

"Stop making up stuff."

Even if Grete was the one to say that, Ron wouldn't believe her for a second.

Romantic relationships are a difficult topic for spies. There are those who prioritize romantic feelings over missions, and depending on the time, that can turn into a weakness. Hence, he had to tell her right away.

"Grete, about your feelings, I can't—"

"Please wait..." Grete's voice was shaking. "...with your response."

Ron was forcefully interrupted, as the girl shook her head.

"...I haven't...mentally prepared myself for that yet."

"I'd like to give you one clear answer right now though."

"But..."

Hearing Grete's voice, faint enough to vanish the next moment, Ron started to feel bad. Although she was a spy, at the base of it all, she still is a 18-year old girl, so he should probably be a bit more delicate.

"Apologies. Then, let us do this another time."

"...Thank you very much."

"All I want you to know is that I don't appreciate mixing public and private affairs. You don't have to prepare tea for me anymore starting tomorrow. You are not my maid or something like that, so you don't have to be considerate of me, just focus on your own training."

Grete pressed her lips together, looking like she couldn't accept this turn of events. Though Ron did want to be considerate of her maidenly heart, he had way too many things to worry about on his own. Being an instructor, as well as a spy, and now even a responsibility as a man? That was too much.

"...I understand." The girl nodded. "That being said, at least let me take care of the report..."

"Report?"

"Yes, the report about the mission you have cleared today..."

Grete handed Ron some documents she had kept hidden until now, consisting of numerous stacks of paper.

"Though you might think of this as intrusive...I figured you would have hard work with this."

"...You wrote it on my behalf?"

"...Yes. At least what I could see from your movements."

He checked the contents. Just as she told him, she had written down the procedure of the apprehending. Since he didn't feel any presence watching him close-by, she must have used binoculars from a distance, most likely because she didn't want to bother him during his mission.

"This is the exact opposite of what I just said though."

"...Want me to spoil you some more?"

"I'd like to ignore that question. But still, you helped me out a lot, so thank you."

Grete calmly bowed down, even though Ron should have been the one to. She picked up the empty tea cup, about to leave the room. Ron felt gratitude towards such a dedicated subordinate of his. By taking a short

break, he felt a bit more energized from before. Preparing himself for his battle with [Shikabane], he was about to mentally get into a working mood again, when—

“Wait a second.”

—He stopped Grete. Something was off. His trained senses were warning him that something didn’t add up. He was overlooking something.

“Then, when did you come up with that plan?”

Grete, just about to leave the room, turned around, and tilted her head in confusion.

“When...referring to what exactly?”

“That was way too quick.” Ron directed a suspicious gaze at Grete. “I did not tell anybody about the mission today. You should not have had any time to come up with a plan like that.”

For today’s attack, the girls did not have any time to prepare, thinking rationally. Ron thought of taking Lily with him on the spot right then and there. Not to mention that he didn’t tell her about the mission of the contents. Yet, Grete managed to keep up, which was enough for a high evaluation already, but that wasn’t even all—?

Grete put a finger on her mouth, as she started thinking.

“Let me think...From the transmitter put on Lily, I saw that she was moving, so I predicted the location, and took the train to get to the location, taking in the time to grasp the situation...” Grete muttered in a quiet tone, as she ordered the information.

Finally, she spit out the cold, hard truth.

“Two seconds...that is how long it took me to come up with that plan...”

Way too short. But, it wasn’t too far off to be a lie. Taking in the time to move to the same city as Ron, grasping the locations Ron and Lily headed to, and how long it took to clear away the residents, there was mostly no time to come up with a plan if it took any longer. Still, Ron was overwhelmed.

Naturally, Ron himself would be able to come up with an even qualitatively higher plan in the same amount of time, but he was the world’s strongest spy after all. The girl’s brain capacity had already blown past a great range of highly-skilled spies. The same girl who had been a drop-out at the educational facility had come this far after two months— This growth spurt could only be explained with the word ‘Genius’.

“...This is not something you have to praise me for.” The girl shook her head. “This is but one of the hundreds, no, thousands of simulations I had previously come up with...Fighting with the Boss every day, I can rather precisely guess what your actions would be. And then, night after night, I think of methods on how to conquer you, amassing ideas, and this time, I just used one out of these...”

“Why would you go that far...”

“Why wouldn’t I? The person who has won my feelings is ruining his own body, taking on missions all alone, not relying on me. Not to mention that I

can give anything back, and instead even ask you to play along with our lessons." Grete announced with dampened eyes, about to break out in tears. "How could I not be impatient...I can only burden the person I care for the most..."

Hearing this, Ron could only return a bewildered gaze. These thousands of repeated calculations are the reason for her rapid growth? Her love for him was deeper than he had anticipated, leaving him in confusion. **Why would Grete have such profound feelings for him?** Even his intuition couldn't give Ron an answer. That being said, there was something he had to prioritize before that.

"——"

He hesitated only for a second. The conclusion didn't take too long, as hope shone down on him. A method that allowed him to evade this cornered situation. First off, he had to dispel the misunderstanding that the girl apparently possessed.

"Grete." Ron called out to her. "I do not think of you as a burden."

"...Eh?"

"Rather, I am thankful to you. You girls have filled the void that the loss of [Homura] had created inside of my heart. I was the one who wished for the persistence of [Tomoshihi] the most."

Grete raised both her eyebrows.

"Is that...so...?"

"Yeah. On top of that, I'm just careful. A bit too much, maybe."

Others would call him a coward. But, he thought of them as precious. He didn't want to lose them. However, there is a time when one has to take the one step forward. Nothing would be achieved with just living in cowardice.

"The assassination of an assassin—that is the next mission."

"—Eh?" Grete's eyes opened wide.

"Grete, could I borrow your strength? I need you."

He could only bet on it. On her intellect, as well as her feelings for him. In order for the team to move onto the next stage, a strong determination was needed, just like hers.

"Was that...?" Grete took a deep breath.

"What?"

"...A proposal?"

"No."

All strength left Ron's shoulders. The second after he praised it, Ron doubted her intelligence. Maybe he really was better off openly revealing his feelings right now.

"...That was just a joke."

However, before Ron could do so, Grete smiled softly.

"Boss, I have no hopes that my love would be fulfilled...I don't want to experience any of that...That being said, my answer is already written in stone." With her usual calm and collected voice, she gave strong words. "—I will gladly accept. If that is for the sake of you, as well as your team."

No hesitation resided in her eyes. Though he still didn't know the basis, the reason for her affection, he could only say one thing in this situation.

“—Marvelous.”

“...Just as expected.”

Towards Ron's declaration, Grete muttered quietly.

Finally, Ron had spotted a new possibility in this mess. A strategy that would allow him to overcome an Impassable Mission more difficult than the previous.

“I will select four members.”

“Select...?”

“Yeah. Though it pains me to say it, I cannot take all eight of you with me for this mission.” Ron nodded. “We will challenge the assassin with the strongest four of [Tomoshihi] at this current time.”

1 Think I called it Crimson Furnace in v1, just a small reminder

2 Literally [Corpse]

3 [Beloved Daughter]

Chapter 2: Placation

Selection.

Ron' decision had already reached everybody else. Not just Grete, but the other girls all had their own doubts about this.

—Namely, Ron' habit to do everything on his own.

Naturally, it was Ron' right to give orders. However, things were different if Ron is the actual one doing everything during said mission. And not just that, Ron equally had to take care of reports and accounting, as well as the guidance for the girls themselves. This resulted in his possible world record of 'Consecutive Row of Days with no Break'.

Being a full-fledged team, the structure was distorted to an uncomfortable level. However, the aim at this announcement was as clear as day. It was all to have the girls fully devote themselves to their training. There existed only one method to not be disregarded as unnecessary.

—Show clear and apparent growth. Reach a level where Ron could put faith into you.

Judging thus, the girls embarked on their respective training lessons.

Though they felt bad for Ron himself, he had to play along with their attacks, always aiming for an opening of his, as training of course. During the times Ron was not present, they would focus on muscle training on their own, or deceiving each other inside their group to come up with plans in order to gain Ron' favor.

And then, when they had found a mission for themselves—

“So he takes four with him...that means that the other four will have to stay home and take care of the place.” Lily let out an unperturbed voice.

The girl had security goggles on her face, as she faced the desk. In her hands, she had several suspicious-looking tools. Following that, a great number of cigarettes. In short, she was boiling up the nicotine inside, extracting that. Additionally, she broke down insects or plants, retrieving the poison, mixing it with others.

She really was a clumsy girl most of the time, but when it came to poison, she would take no misstep. Even as she talked, she proceeded with precise movement.

“Well, that's perfectly reasonable, I guess.”

The one who gave a nonchalant response was a white-haired girl—Zibia.

She always had an arrogant, commanding tone to her. Her eyes were as sharp as a blade, owner to a physique resembling a wild animal so slim. Just

as Lily, she was currently seventeen years old. While Lily was busy with her own projects, Zibia rested on Lily's bed, practicing her lockpicking skill, tools for this in her hands. Next to her were more than ten padlocks, opening everything from A to Z.

"He's worried about leaving a mission to us. Then again, even a monster like him will eventually hit his limits. It makes sense that he'd take the best four of us with him."

"Figures~ It really isn't a bad idea." Lily sighed.

"Speaking logically, it is logical." Zibia commented.

"But, you know~"

"Yeah, I get you~"

Their anxious voices overlapped.

"“I feel like that will make the team all awkward as a result...”"

Until now, the girls of [Tomoshibi] all worked together. Nobody would aim for a higher role or evaluation, showing their strength, and hoping that they could go on a mission together. No discrepancy in their team, no real hierarchy. And now, four members would be selected—

"Well, I was prepared for a day like this to come eventually. After living here for two months, you can sort of see who's more proficient, and who made the most progress."

"By the way, who's your candidate?"

"Naturally, it can only be this beautiful leader Lily-chan—"

"Answer this seriously."

"...Pretty sure Monika-chan will be taken."

The disrespectful, blue-silver-haired girl, Monika. Thinking about the most skilled and proficient girl, this was the name popping up inside Lily's head first. Be it acting, intentiveness, hand-to-hand fighting, and marksmanship, she was at the top of every discipline. She even previously announced *I just held back at the educational facility*'. Basically, something like an extraordinary existence in [Tomoshibi], otherwise filled with drop-outs. In terms of raw skill, she was closest to Ron. And, a fellow member of the action squad.

"Also, we'll definitely be left behind, won't we!"

"That's probably what'll happen, yeah."

Zibia agreed with Lily's agonizing grunt. The team of [Tomoshibi] was split up into three squads. The [Intelligence Squad], focussing on gathering information, planning, and guidance. The [Action Squad], following the orders of the Intelligence Squad, and lastly, the [Peculiar Deeds Squad], supporting the two other squads with their special talents. If there existed an ace in one respective squad, the chance for the others being taken was lowered dramatically.

"Oh, it's time. We'll continue this later."

"Yup, it's our turn to make dinner after all."

Cutting their conversation, the two left the room. Today, they were on cooking duty, meaning that they had to make the dinner for the other girls.

Arriving at the kitchen, a brown-haired girl greeted them, already wearing an apron.

"Ah, Sara. What happened?"

"Is it y'all's turn today?"

The brown-haired girl—Sara, flashed a sociable smile. With her ruffled hair, making her look like a small animal, she gave off a timid atmosphere with her constant concerned gaze. Though it got better in recent days, at the very beginning, she looked close to breaking out in tears just by meeting eyes with her. This invoked a strong desire to protect her, with her age being only about 15 one of the biggest reasons for it.

Today, Sara wasn't even on cooking duty, and yet she was holding a cooking knife.

"Sensei asked me to make food for him. He's busy with Grete-senpai, doing a strategy meeting." Sara gave the reason after she was asked.

The girl would address the other girls with [Senpai], because she had entered her educational facility last of them all.

"So Sensei asked you for food, huh..." Lily gave a mutter, sounding rather surprised.

How unusual. Normally, Ron would not leave any of his own housework to the girls. The girls were nothing more than his subordinates in the spy team, showing no influence on his own daily life. Seeing that, he really must be busy with preparations.

"....."

Lily and Zibia met gazes, and nodded at the same time.

"A chance! I'll go get my poison!"

"That was way too quick, ya two!" Sara screamed in disbelief.

"I'll bring my wires."

"The heck is this effortless coordination?"

Sara tried to stop the two, who had already come up with another attack plan, but now that they started, they wouldn't stop anymore. Because the two had arrived at a certain conclusion.

—This might be their last chance to influence Ron's choice.

"The problem is, how can we work things out with the three of us."

"So I already turned into a member of this mess, huh..." Sara sighed in disbelief.

Her eyes were filled with an emotion of *Wouldn't change much even if I revolted now*, so she gave up. The ingredients were lined up in the kitchen, the three standing in front of them.

"Taking all the previous failures into consideration..." Lily played around with a bottle of paralytic poison in her hands. "When we put it into the tea or food itself, he didn't touch it, so maybe we should drench the tableware with poison?"

In general, acting didn't work against Ron. On top of that, he was sensitive towards traps. Hence, if they didn't dampen his ability to concentrate, he would not eat poisoned food.

"Seriously, Sensei is such a monster, right." Sara held her head.

After that, they came up with a mountain full of ideas such as Put poison in the seasonings, and have him put it on himself or Give him a spicy meal, and put poison in the water or I'll put poison on my own plate, and feed him!

However none of those ideas really sounded like they would work.

After thinking for a while, Zibia tilted her head, as if something was off.

"Hm? Isn't the easiest method still left?"

Sara stopped her own words, asking "Eh, what's that then?" she asked.

Zibia announced towards that.

"We're going to put poison in the food, right? So why don't we just make something delicious?"

"....." Sara blinked a few times. "...?" Following that, she sought help from Lily.

Apparently, she hasn't caught on to Zibia's speciality.

"Sara-chan." Lily started her explanation. "I was hiding it until now, but I'm actually really clumsy. For example, I'm the type to normally ace a test, but happen to mistake the lines, messing up all my answers to get a perfect 0."

"Zat so."

"And, this white-haired beauty over here is the type to get a perfect 0, even if she filled out the test in perfect order." Lily pointed at Zibia, introducing her.

Zibia just kicked Lily right on her butt.

"What kind of example is that?!"

"A perfect one! Fitting tightly to your degree of stupidity."

"Says the girl who got a perfect 0 just like me!"

"Better than some gorilla who can only fight with nothing more in her head!" Lily screamed in agony at the pain.

Talking about her ways of thinking, Zibia would always charge straight ahead. A battle of strength was the only way to deal with things.

Now that any acting wouldn't work on Ron, she would take in a clueless ally, making the target explode. If a frontal attack didn't work on Ron, she would attack him during his sleep. With every problem in front of her, she would try to solve it with raw physical power, as simple as possible.

—That is how the girl liked to operate.

"Anyway, let's start the operation." Zibia emphasized. "First, we'll create a magnifique dinner. The best out there, which will lead the target to let down his guard. After that, we finish him off with some poisoned tea—Isn't that the best method?"

"Hm. Now that you say it, it does make sense." Lily muttered.

Putting it into words, it wasn't necessarily something irregular either.

"But, how? It's simple to put it into words."

"I got something prepared for that." Zibia said with confidence. "A while ago, I saw that guy making his own food. Thinking that it might be useful for the future, I took some notes." Zibia had a small piece of paper in her hand as she said that.

Written on there were necessary ingredients, the amount of seasoning, and the fine procedures of the cooking itself.

"This guy's a genius at cooking as well, and he made this all for himself, right? If we make the dinner like he did, it'll definitely work out."

"Ohh, I see~"

Hearing the details of Zibia's plan, Lily saw the potential. On top of that, they weren't able to come up with anything else, so trying it out now wouldn't hurt.

"Alright then! Let's make some food that will rob him of his reason!"

Lily and Sara both joined in with a motivated "'Yeah!!'"

Errors overlapped in their execution. Recreating Ron's cooking wasn't that easy of an operation. Since Ron was measuring the ingredients by eye, they could only put trust in Zibia's calculations.

The one response for the actual cooking was Sara, because she was the daughter of a restaurant chef. Giving support to her, Zibia told her everything she remembered back during her observation. Several countless works of art were created as tests, all tested by Lily, who had previously proudly announced that she would take care of the sampling. Without leaving anything behind, she kept asking for the next dish. It was almost like she was the personification of gluttony.

Delaying the normal dinner time by two hours, they finally managed to create a satisfying dish.

—Stuffed Cabbage.

Lily saw this success, and immediately headed to the rooms of the other girls, telling them "This time, we have prepared the perfect plan!"

Naturally, this invoked nothing but speculative responses from the girls, but Lily had anticipated this with a plan of her own.

"If this fails, there will be naked dancing. By Zibia-chan, that is." Lily made selfish promises without the other person's consent.

Hence, the girls all prepared their separate weapons, assembling in the dining room. After Ron was weakened by the poison, they would finish him. They gathered just as planned, called Ron over, and showed him their work of art.

"—Marvelous." He announced.

His expression was softer than usual.

"Sorry that you had to make this for me, this is great."

"Right?" Zibia smiled confidently. "We have seconds, as well, so go ham."

Lily, can you pour him some tea?"

Just as planned, Ron was letting his guard down, so Zibia moved on to the next stage of the plan. He might actually drink the poisoned tea without any doubts. The other girls felt the same, and waited in the shadows, ready to strike.

"Yeah." Ron commented. "If there is one thing that I wanted even more—"

With these words, he stood up, and moved to the kitchen next to the dining room. There, he spotted second helpings of the stuffed cabbage. He put

some seasonings into the white stew added onto it, stirring it. Following that, he cut the stuffed cabbage into eight pieces, pouring the white stew onto it, and as a last act, put spice, vinegar, and some oil into the mix. “—This would make it even better.” Ron said, and put the plates with the cabbage on it in front of the girls.

“.....”

They felt like something was off. However, acting suspicious was not an option, so they grabbed the spoons, carefully cutting up their shares, and carrying it into their mouths—only for them to have their reasoning stolen. Before they realized it, Ron had already left the dining room. The girls had completely forgotten about their whole plan of attacking Ron, fully engrossed with eating the stuffed cabbage, even fishing out the last few drops of the stew with bread. Satisfied with the dinner, they went to drink some of the black tea to finish it off, when they suddenly felt their bodies growing numb.

A perfect failure. All the other members besides Zibia, Lily, and Sara had apparently anticipated this result, as they immediately went back to their rooms on wobbly legs. Some of them even told Zibia that they were looking forward to her naked dance, but the girl herself had no idea what they were talking about.

“To think that our plan would fail before we could even get to the poison...” Lily sighed in the now empty dining room.

Zibia and Sara nodded along.

“I really thought that we had it this time, damn it.”

“It gave my body a joyful sensation.”

They could only accept it. With just one dish like that, they couldn’t hope to beat Ron. No doubting it, he was using this as a skill for his missions as well. Maybe he had learned this during a time where he was invading royalty as a five-star chef. Or, even to seduce the opposite sex to get any sort of information. His self-proclaimed title as the world’s strongest spy really wasn’t for show. And that made them understand that he had no reason to even rely on them.

“Well, guess we can only give up on the mission this time.”

“Yup...”

Zibia gave the logical conclusion with a sigh, to which Lily agreed without arguing. After all, as of right now, there were more skilled and proficient girls present in [Tomoshibi]. Sara must have felt the same, as she wordlessly nodded along, showing a saddened expression. However, just as the atmosphere turned heavy, Lily opened her mouth.

“...But, this is our chance to turn things around.”

“The heck is up with that shit-eating grin.”

“The three of us have failed. That being said, we were equally given an important mission. What will happen if the people left behind get frustrated?”

“...The atmosphere will probably get heavy, as they are considerate of the ones chosen?”

“There is only one thing that can avoid that. Namely, have the ones left behind have to congratulate the ones chosen.”

“Ohh” Zibia raised her voice, clapping her hands together in consent.

“Thinking about it in the long run, that might be an important role as well.”

“Right right right!” Lily smiled.

Of course, it would have been the best possible outcome for her to get chosen, but now that she wouldn’t be, she had to change her train of thought. She did not wish for her bonds with the other girls to break.

“U-Um.” Sara carefully raised her hand. “Could I help ya in that? I personally think I ain’t going to be chosen anyway...”

Neither Lily nor Zibia could deny that. Being the youngest girl in the group after being taken from her educational facility, it might be something that couldn’t be helped, but her skill was definitely lacking. Comparing her to the other girls in the Peculiar Deeds squad, such as Elna or Annette, she was clearly lacking. Though the two didn’t say it out loud, Sara didn’t need to hear it.

“Of course.” Zibia judged with a smile. “Let’s congratulate the others with the three of us.”

Having something they could work towards, the atmosphere grew a bit lighter. Zibia stood up from the sofa, slapping her own cheeks.

“Alright! Enough with the hesitation!”

“Right! Let’s get this party started!”

“How about we start congratulating Monika? She’s gonna get chosen for sure.”

“Agreed! Let’s start with Monika-senpai.”

“Okay! How about we make a parfait for her?”

The three of them started to get excited, working to make a parfait for their ally. Through this, the girls understood the hardships of being spies. Having been gathered here from various locations, it made sense that not everybody could be on the same level. And, the world of spies wasn’t as naive as to overlook that. They had tasted this more than enough in their educational facilities. However, just getting depressed at this was not an option.

The members might be all different with good and bad skills—But they only had one [Tomoshihi]!

With these feelings in mind, they finished their large-size parfait. With fruits and chocolate, a mountain of whipped cream on top. Finishing it off, they carved small hearts into strawberries, decorating the parfait with it. Making sure that it was perfect, they sneaked up to Monika’s room, careful that nobody would pick up on it.

““““We came here to assist the great Monika-chan!!!””””

They all barged inside without restraint.

—It doesn't matter if we weren't chosen. We'll just put your faith into you, and bring you this parfait.

"There's no mistaking it that Monika-chan will be chosen."

"Work hard for our share, alright."

"We'll be supporting ya."

The person receiving this gift didn't look too annoyed by it. Hence, they left the room in satisfaction, when they ran into Ron, standing in the hallway.

"Ahh, perfect timing." He announced. "Pack your things. Grete, Lily, Sara, and Zibia. You four will ride the train tomorrow."

""""Eh..."""

"It's time for the mission."

The three all opened their mouths in disbelief. Apparently, the three of them had been chosen for the mission. And, that left something else to be considered.

"U-Um, what about Monika-chan then...?"

"Hm? She was planned to be on stand-by though?" Ron calmly announced. Because a selection of members would leave the team in an awkward state. Hence, they prepared a surprise to bring up the mood, but—

"""" """"

Starting from the conclusion, things got even more awkward now.



Grabbed by the collar, an angry Monika right in front of her.

"You picking a fight with me? What was that parfait about just now? Some new type of harassment? You're fine Sara, you probably got wrapped up in their nonsense again. The problem is you two. Could you two useless mobs finally stop missing up everything for someone who's actually doing the work? Or in other words, me. Huh?"

Monika blew a fuse at Lily, whereas Zibia straight ran to Ron's room.

"Hold on a damn secooooooooooooooooooooond!"

"I appreciate your vigor."

Without knocking, she barged right in. Even so, Ron showed no signs of being surprised at the sudden intruder. He just sat on his chair as always, clearly used to this situation. Zibia approached him with great steps, throwing her complaints without restraint.

"Your timing couldn't have been worse! Stop joking with me!"

"How could I be blamed for that just now?"

Oddly enough, he was perfectly right. Zibia had to accept this, coughing once to calm herself down. Because she got so worked up, she accidentally screamed at him.

"...Hey, can I ask one question?"

"What is it?"

"Are you really sure about picking the three of us?"

"Are you not happy with that?"

"N-No, I'm actually super happy. But, I wanted to hear the reason for that decision." The second she relaxed, she started grinning subconsciously. Though she often retorted on Ron's ridiculous actions and movements, she deeply respected him. He was without a doubt the most proficient spy he had run into so far. Being accepted by such a guy definitely made her happy. That was also the reason why she needed to know his true intention. It was hard to say that Zibia, Lily, or Sara were definitely at the level of some of the other girls. So, why were they chosen?

"I see, then let me give it to you straight."

"Yup."

"—I can't help but feel worried."

"Ouch?!" She screamed without meaning to.

Ron lifted his head, and pointed the tip of his pen at Zibia's right arm.

"How is that fracture in your right arm doing?"

"That's..."

"Not fully healed yet, right? You should be limited to only half of your ability right now."

Apparently, he had seen right through her. The fracture on her right arm—a result from the previous Impassable Mission. She had to guard against the kick of a certain monster. With just that one kick, she was unable to participate any further in the battle. Though around a month had passed ever since then, it was hard to say that she fully recovered from that.

"Then, why did you pick me?"

"I do have a reason for my choice. But, I can't reveal that just yet."

"...Just to make sure, it's not just because you can't properly put it into words, right?"

"....."

"Say something?!" Zibia retorted, but that definitely had to be a joke. Spies were never taught the full range of details about a mission. If they knew too much, they could be targeted, and they always ran the risk of revealing information to the enemy. Though she knew about this, she couldn't fully accept it.

Ron audibly sighed, crossing his arms.

"If I had to say one thing, this is pretty important to you, right?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you're sending all your salary anonymously to an orphanage, right?"

"Hey, why do you know about that?" Zibia felt an odd sweat run down her back.

After clearing the Impassable Mission, Zibia had received a huge amount of money. However, she didn't touch that at all, just sending it to a certain orphanage. And, nobody should have found out about that—

"If you use this much money, the higher-ups will suspect that you're betraying us."

Apparently, they were under the permission that she was sending off money to some suspicious institution.

"The reason I chose you is related to these circumstances. That's why I'd like you to go, but..." Ron stopped his words for a short moment.

He ran his gaze between Zibia's arm and face several times, and eventually sighed.

"...Can't forget about the injury on your own. If you're not feeling up to it, I don't mind if you step down this time."

He really must have had a lot of conflict with this selection, as there had been the sound of grief in his voice. Zibia panicked a bit, as she waved her hands at him.

"Wait a second. I didn't come here to step down from the mission. I just wanted to know if you were worrying about us in any way again."

"....." Ron gazed at her in silence.

"You're always pretty bold, but as soon as it involves your allies, you get all careful."

"That's what it looks like, yes."

Ron couldn't deny his own personality. His own actions were flashy. Declaring himself as the world's strongest spy, he would act brimming with confidence. However, the second it came to relying on his allies, he grew cautious. Naturally, the reason for that was the trauma he received from losing his allies before.

“—I don’t need any of your worries. That is all I wanted to tell you. I was really happy that you chose me.” Zibia pointed her first at Ron. “You picked me up from the educational facility after all, so I plan on repaying you, and your expectations. Grete is working her hardest, so I can’t just slack off.” Zibia was one of those who had a hard time back at the educational facility. She had the clear aspiration to become a spy. Neither did she disregard her efforts. However, misfortune assaulted her, leaving her close to just running away. If she hadn’t been scouted for [Tomoshihi], she would have had to withdraw.

Hearing the girl’s words, Ron closed his eyes, crossing his arms.

“—Marvelous.”

She wasn’t sure if her emotions got through him, but he at least nodded.

“You really are the kindest out of everyone in the team. You act a bit prudent from time to time as well, though.”

“Didn’t need to hear the last part.” Zibia glared at Ron.

He just slowly opened his eyes, and muttered a calm *Yeah, you’re right.*

“Then, could you join me in a special lesson right now? Just some light sparring.”

“Sparring? But, my right arm...”

“I’ll only use one finger.”

“!”

Ron showed no signs of being worried, just calmly raising his index finger. To that, Zibia shrugged with her shoulders. She knew how strong he was, but just with one finger, what could he hope to achieve?

“...Aren’t you looking down on me a bit too much?”

“Then, how about I have you wear a maid uniform when you lose?”

“Huh? That sure came out of nowhere.”

“Are you too intimidated now? You can go ahead and use whatever weapon you want.”

He sounded even more provocative than before. To that, Zibia felt a vein pop inside her head.

“Fight’s on, punk! I’ll wear whatever you want me to!”

“—Marvelous.”

Ron stood up, slightly narrowed his eyes.

“From time to time, it doesn’t hurt to get serious.”

The conclusion arrived in two seconds.

“So you girls are the new maids!”

Standing in front of Zibia, Grete, and Lily was a woman in the later half of her twenties, flashing the smile of someone who was overly confident in their job. She had her blonde hair bound up on the back of her head, which shook like a horse’s tail everytime she moved. Talking about her clothes, she wore a black one-piece, with a white, shining apron on top of that. Her name was Olivia, and she apparently acted as the head of the maids. And now, she gazed at the resume of the girls.

"A part-time job during the holidays of your religious school, huh. Quite the weird timing for a holiday. Well, after a recommendation from that politician, there's no reason to doubt that."

Following that, she scratched her cheek, a dubious expression coloring her face.

"Um...why is this white-haired girl here glaring at the maid uniform?"

".....Please don't mind it."

Zibia still couldn't accept the reality in front of her. She was provided with a uniform given out to the servants of the owner of the current location, a certain residence. Just as Olivia's, it was a black one-piece, with a white apron on top, allowing for easy household work. A legendary outfit having passed down ever since the first nobles had rested in private residences.

"....."

To say it again, Zibia had short-cut hair, with a sharp gaze in her eyes. Rather than cute, girly clothes, a boyish look fit her much more. She was fully aware of this, choosing the a fitting pants-look, and if possible, she'd like to cut up that religious school's uniform whenever she had to wear it.

I really have to give that guy a taste of my fist soon...

Maid clothes were like a foreign world to her.

Let's go back in time, two weeks to be precise. Four girls had gathered in the reception hall of the Kagerou Palace, the day before the departure.

Codename [Manamusume] — Grete. Red hair. 18 years old. Intelligence Squad.

Codename [Hanazono] — Lily. Silver hair. 17 years old. Action Squad.

Codename [Hyakki²] — Zibia. White hair. 17 years old. Action Squad.

Codename [Sougen³] — Sara. Brown Hair. 15 years old. Peculiar Deeds Squad.

Those were the participants for the current mission. They all sat on the sofa, surrounding Ron.

'Our goal of this mission is to eliminate a certain assassin called [Shikabane].'

Ron stood up, starting his explanation.

'With the information our comrades had offered their lives for, we managed to pin-point the next possible candidate for the assassination. Using this, we will lurk around that candidate, sniffing out [Shikabane].'

An assassin. Not exactly a mission that they could swallow easily. There existed a high chance of a wild slaughtering happening.

Lily listened to Ron' explanation, and raised her hand.

'Sensei, a question. The mission this time takes place here inside the country, right?'

'Yeah, what about it?'

'It might be a bit late, but you have cleared missions inside the country, right? Why would someone infiltrating other countries be acting as a spy in his own country?'

The other girls nodded along. As of right now, they had never received a proper explanation for it.

‘...I see, then let’s review that.’ Ron explained, while writing on a blackboard, with quite the horrible handwriting. ‘In the Office of Foreign Intelligence, there exist two divisions. The first division, Counterintelligence, working to filter out enemy spies in our own country. Following that, there’s the normal Intelligence, the second division, with spies who work in the foreign countries, gathering information and acting out other duties.’

Speaking in general terms, the first division acted like a secret police, whereas the second division consisted of actual spies.

‘So that means that [Tomoshibi] belongs to the second division?’

‘No, both actually.’

‘Both?’

‘What is asked from us is that we can take care of both inside the country, and outside. Following up on missions other teams couldn’t clear, and do it in their stead. That was [Homura]’s job, meaning that we as [Tomoshibi] inherit such.’

Grete put one hand on her lips.

‘Basically, Impassable Missions will always be at the center...’

An Impassable Mission—Meaning that comrades had attempted this mission previously, but failed at it. As a result of this, the mission will be regarded as more difficult. With a mortality rate of more than 90%, only a 10% chance of clearing it.

Sara tilted her head, slightly confused.

‘Huh? But, if I remember correctly, we were always taught not to touch any Impassable Missions back at the educational facility, aye?’

‘Well, not many people know, but there is a continuation to that.’ Ron announced. ‘Don’t touch any Impassable Missions, because that is [Homura]’s speciality.’

The girls swallowed their breaths. They were overwhelmed with an immense feeling of pressure and responsibility. At the same time, they could consent to it. Because even in a world of spies, there existed those missions that had to be challenged, no matter how cruel and almost impossible they would seem. The number of a 90% mortality rate probably referred to anybody besides [Homura].

‘Might be a bit late, but we sure have taken quite the crazy team to follow after, huh.’

As if to gather all the thoughts of the girls, Lily muttered. Basically, the strict definition didn’t make them any spies with what they were about to do. That being said, they would be treated as an intelligence agency. In the category of [War waged in Shadows], [Tomoshibi] would be acting at its fullest.

‘Let’s get back to the topic.’ Ron nodded. ‘Grete, Lily Zibia. I will have you get into contact with a certain individual. A high-ranking member of the

Parliament. You will stand guard in their residence. Hiding in concealment, we'll sniff out the enemy.'

Lord Uwe, apparently was the name of the person they were supposed to guard. Having been ordered, the girls nodded.

'Sara and I will support you from outside the residence.'

Sara nodded to that as well, looking slightly terrified though.

'Let's go, and get back alive, all of us.'

Together with these words, the spies stood up.

Grete took care of all the details that allowed them to sneak in.

Uwe Appell. The current head of the Appell Family, having been big players in politics for generations now. Currently a high-ranking member in the Diet, working for the current vice minister of the Ministry of Health and Welfare, or in other words, radical left wing. Whilst being in the upper caste, he's taking serious criticism on vested interests, working hard to improve the situation of the poor. Not to mention that he's involved with welfare projects everywhere.

The man had no black dots in his career. Being the son of a member of the Diet himself, he had been trained in this field ever since he was young.

Hence, he had a strong love for his country. Being excellent at his work, he is most likely on a high spot in the list of politicians other countries would want to see eliminated. The people assassinated by [Shikabane] were all people similar to him.

The residence of Uwe was found a bit away from the capital, with the worst possible location. Fully isolated, deep into the woods. It would take one hour to get there, and another hour from the bus stop.

If there was one peculiar trait, then it would be the great luxury of the residence, even though barely any people lived there. Around thirty rooms were to be found, but only the person himself, his wife, and his parents lived there. Additionally, his exclusive secretary, and the head of the maids.

Rather than for the sake of the residents, the maids have been stocked up to keep the residence itself clean for potential guests. The predecessor had passed away in an accident apparently.

Running the details through their heads again, Zibia and the others changed in some open room.

Well, I can understand that becoming a maid is the easiest way to get access to this place...

She had mentally prepared herself for this, but it still was a bit too much.

Lily caught on to Zibia stopping her movement, grinning from ear to ear.

"Pfft, Zibia-chan, are you the type who has a high resistance against an apron and skirt? Because you don't like cute clothes?"

"Shut your trap. I'll smack you if you keep going with that."

"After smacking me already?"

The two of them rammed their fist against the other's, whereas Grete had already finished her preparations.

"...Still, what a mysterious residence this is."

"Hm?"

"...There is barely anything to mention. For a member of the Diet, with a long heritage, you would think that there were more luxurious interior designs."

Just as the girl pointed out, besides the paintings in the reception hall of the residence, in the hallways where the guests would not walk through, nothing of any value would be found, no works of art to decorate the place. Only empty walls, which hasn't reached any renovation recently.

"Oh, you really know a lot about this sort of thing." Zibia showed admiration.

"...The thing is, I actually come from a family of politicians."

First time they heard of that. To think that her knowledge in this matter originated from her being a politician's daughter.

"...Maybe the lord of this residence could be someone rather unpleasant."

"Alright, I get it. Not the time to hesitate because of a maid uniform, huh."

Zibia quickly took off her uniform, slipping into the maid uniform. Grete was fully motivated for this, so she couldn't be allowing herself to skip out.

"Time to get serious. We'll rock this place on day one."

Flashing undefeatable smiles, the girls went on to begin their mission.

By the time the first day ended, Olivia observed the hallways, her mouth open in amazement.

"Eh, what is this..." Her words fit perfectly with her expression.

Her eyes were wide open as well, frozen in place. Even after a few moments passed, she would not move from that spot, like a statue. However, she finally gulped, and nodded. With her usual perfect customer service smile, she turned towards the three girls.

"You girls are something else! In just one day, you had the residence look all sparkly and new!" Observing the change in the residence, she clapped her hands together in joy.

Until one month ago before the girls joined, right after the predecessor had passed away, Olivia apparently had taken care of the residence all by herself. Her hands full with cooking and laundry, she couldn't even hope to get to cleaning. Dust had gathered in the residence, the curtains and carpet smelling moldy.

And now, that has changed drastically. The dust had been swept away, the curtains washed, and a cleaner ran over the carpet. The girls had shown a perfect job as maids.

"No no no, it's not that big of a deal~" Lily didn't even try to hide her boastful expression, just grinning.

At the educational facility, the girls had to take care of their own housework. Choosing the correct detergent for the piece of clothing when they go to do laundry, sweeping away any dust that gathered. Compared to the normal lessons they had to go through with Ron, cleaning a residence

like this was no big deal. Though Lily was clumsy, with the guidance of the other two, even she could manage.

"The youth nowadays really is something else. With you girls like this, you might be able to fight with Uwe-san."

"That reminds me, I haven't seen him yet."

"He has been staying at a hotel in the countryside, and will be returning tomorrow. I don't want to scare you, but you best be prepared. He can be a bit on the rough side. Probably a relic from his time as a soldier."

Just as Grete mentioned in her analysis, Uwe seemed to be quite the difficult person to deal with. They probably had to be careful not to spoil his mood in any way. Getting fired before finding [Shikabane] would be too much of a disgrace.

Still, feeling fulfilled from their work, the girls headed back to the rooms reserved for servants. With so many free rooms, every girl had her own room to their full disposal. Inside Lily's room, the girl herself and Zibia both let out a sigh, when—

"—Seems like you successfully managed to sneak in."

A voice came from the window. Once the girls gave the okay, Ron jumped inside. Since the rooms for the servants were on the first floor, a well-built man like him should have no trouble getting inside. Three people in just one room was indeed rather narrow, but it couldn't be helped. Ron was a bit worried that their voices could be heard, but from the sounds of it, nobody was walking past them.

"How are things?" Ron asked.

"The only problem here is that these clothes don't fit me at all." Zibia just arrogantly shrugged her shoulders.

"No worries. They fit you just fine."

"....."

Though her face turned slightly red from the unexpected compliment, she just waved her hand at him to cover it up.

"As if I'd let you deceive me. If you got nothing important, then leave us alone."

Ron softly nodded.

"Then let's start with our activities. Lord Uwe comes back tomorrow. Starting with checking his health and circle of acquaintances, set up tripwires around the residence."

"Gotcha, leave it to us."

"By the way, the method I recommend is—"

"We'll ask Grete about that."

"...Even I am able to feel emotions like [Loneliness], you know."

After they asked him for his opinion, he gave the expected 'Devote yourselves like a modest servant', so they ignored that. If they just kept listening to his advice, they wouldn't make any progress at all.

"Sensei, Sensei." Lily lifted up her body from the bed, looking at Ron. "Uwe-san's life is being targeted, right? Then, wouldn't we just reveal our identities? Like that, we would be able to protect—"

"Stop with that. He might be a cunning politician, but he still is an amateur in the end, so there's a high chance he would leak information to the enemy." Zibia agreed that it sounded like a good idea for a second, but was denied immediately.

"Ah." Lily let out a discouraged voice

"Don't forget. [Shikabane] might have already infiltrated this residence as well."

Together with Ron's reminder, the girls felt tension fill their bodies. The mission had already begun. It doesn't matter if it was inside, or outside their country. They were the main actors in the currently reigning [War waged in Shadows].

"I'm busy right now, so I'll leave it to you. Do it like a cloud receiving shadow from the moon."

Apparently wanting revenge, Ron gave another of his idiotic analogies, and left the room swiftly. Staying for too long wasn't on his agenda apparently.

"Ah, wait a second." Zibia stopped him right before he vanished.

"What is it?"

"Go meet Grete as well. She's in the room next to ours."

Lily picked up on Zibia's intent, and continued. "Ah, that sounds like a good idea. I'm sure she'll be happy!"

"....." Ron returned a silent glare. "You two actually support her romance?"

"Hm? Of course, we're partners after all."

From the sounds of it, Zibia and Lily both picked up on Grete's feelings. No, rather, everybody from [Tomoshihi] had caught on to it. Though that was no difficult feat, seeing how obvious she made it.

"I see." Ron muttered without dwelling much on it.

From his tone of voice, you could not guess his feelings. As he left through the window frame, no more footsteps could be heard of him. Most likely, he was truly heading over to the adjoining room. The question was with what feelings he did so, but he wouldn't tell them.

"Really, giving us no explanations, just asking stuff from us."

"What is he thinking about, really~"

This wasn't the first time they weren't able to guess what Ron was thinking. But, they knew for certain that he was thinking in best interest of them, that much trust they had into them. All they could do was focus on the mission. The second day of their infiltration, around the time the sun started to set, the sounds of a horse carriage approaching could be heard.

"For crying out loud! That fool! Spending important money for his absurd entertainment!"

The most important individual of the mission—Uwe had made his return. His age should be around 58, but his rage made him seem much younger. Called over by Olivia, the three girls greeted him.

Since he didn't employ a driver, he would always take care of it himself. Stopping the car next to the residence, he didn't even try his displeased expression as he walked over.

"Olivia, you don't have to come greet me every single time! Wasted time, wasted money!"

The man clearly possessed a great amount of pressure in his gesturing and tone. With considerable shoulder width, he held his head high, seeming firm at all times. Though he had grey hair with wrinkles in his face befitting his age, he was evermore intimidating.

"...Hm?"

For some reason, the man narrowed his eyes in a suspicious manner. At around ten meters away, he stopped his feet.

"They are the maids that have been recommended to me a few days prior."

Olivia just showed him a calm smile.

"Hmpf. I thought they were your little sister's or something for a second. But it's just some immature brats."

"Our hair color is entirely different. Don't be so threatening now."

"...Well, be it so. Anyway, you are the new maids, huh?"

After finishing their introductions, and showing their careers so far, Uwe raised his chin towards Olivia, saying 'Bring it to me'. Olivia on her end could only sigh, and disappeared from the entrance. The next time she came back, she brought a rifle with her. The length of the barrel was around one meter, and after accepting it from her, Uwe finished loading it.

What was he planning on doing? The girls only watched it silence, when Uwe suddenly opened his eyes wide, pointing the rifle at them.

"You bastards, are you here to kill me, huuuuuuuh?"

A sudden angry roar. Zibia and the others just had their eyes open wide in shock, bending backwards, and crouching down on the floor. That was a serious killing intent he gave off. Though they didn't know as to why.

Uwe watched this, and just clicked his tongue in a displeased manner.

"...Hmpf. Guess they're not gonna reveal themselves that easily."

"E-Eh..." Lily just blinked at Uwe in confusion.

"Recently, two politician comrades of mine had suddenly passed away, so I figured there was an assassin sneaking around, but I ain't gonna show my back that easily. If you had resisted in any way, I would have killed you right here."

"You really keep up your protection, I see..."

"No way, I just have a trigger finger."

What a racial old man. He still didn't point away the muzzle, not even caring in case he accidentally fired the gun.

“But, your qualifications as maids are a different thing.” Uwe finally lifted up the muzzle, away from the girls. “Hey, you white-haired girl. Make me some food, I’m hungry.”

Probably a test to see if he wanted to hire them. Then again, his tone was awfully commanding. That being said, Zibia could not talk back, just peacefully heading to the kitchen. On the way there, she met a rather apologetic expression from Olivia, but she returned a smile, assuring her that everything was fine.

I knew that he was going to be a dangerous old man, but making food is not the worst about this, I guess.

She wasn’t hit too badly. Though she wouldn’t be able to compete against Ron’ cooking, it should be enough to satisfy an old man. Making the menu a safe pot-au-feu, there shouldn’t be any bigger problems. She still had the consommé leftovers from last night as well. Boiling that with some vegetables and meat, adding some bread in the mix, nobody would complain.

Finishing her dish, Zibia carried it to the dining room. Seeing this, Uwe sat down at the table, keeping the rifle close to him still.

“Now, eat as long as it’s still hot.” Zibia put down the pot-a-feu.

The scent of the consommé filled the place, as even Lily started feeling hungry.

—No problem here.

Judging this, Zibia watched over Uwe’s dinner in peace. The man stuffed one spoon inside his mouth, and jumped up from his chair right after.

“A maid who can only make something of this level is a waste!”

Ever since that day, working as maids turned into hell.

Uwe turned out to be even more tyrannic than previous assumptions have stated. If one put it into as few words as possible—He thoroughly hated any unnecessary movement or actions. Looking at the residence, and how she wasn’t at all luxury in contrast to his high position, they might have guessed that.

“You, silver-haired girl! You dropped some more detergent in the hallway, huh?!”

“Hey, White-hair! Don’t clean that spot, it’s such a waste! Dust cloths are not that cheap!”

“Red-hair! Come right away whenever I call for you! Don’t waste my time.”

It was a constant barrage of angry roars. If one showed complaint, they would only get louder. You’re using too much detergent, using too many dust clothes, doing laundry too many times, using up too much water—now it didn’t even feel that fulfilling anymore to work as a maid.

Not to mention that a lot of visitors arrived at the residence. His hate to waste any sort of resource made him an excellent politician. Many bureaucrats or other politicians came by for a visit, asking him for advice on budget or expenses. His field should have been related to welfare, but his guests often belonged to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and

Communications, the Ministry of Transport, the Ministry of Army even. Every time Uwe ran his eyes over the respective protocol, he pointed out any irregularities, or wasted money, no matter how small it was. That in itself might have been a good thing, but taking care of the reception, the departure, or the tea and snacks in between, the maids had to take care of that. After all of this, Lily was the first to mix mistakes in. "Youuuuu! How many times do you have to break my tea cups before you're satisfied?!"

"Eeeeeeeek! I'm sorry!"

Lily had always been clumsy. Zibia knew this from the start, and tried to support her as best as possible, but it wouldn't always work out.

"It's disgusting again today! How many times do I have to tell you to not waste any ingredients?"

"....."

She couldn't make anything that truly satisfied his tongue. She was on a pilgrimage to find out about his tastes, filtering out foods and ingredients he didn't like, and yet he would never be satisfied. In the end, he just left Zibia's food untouched, telling her to 'Eat it yourself!', while he munched on some bread. With these two out of the race, the only one reliable in this situation was Grete, but—

"Do you have any complaints with me?"

She had her own problems to deal with.

"...No, I was just feeling a bit off."

"Stop lying. You hate me right?"

"That is not..."

"Step down. Working with an expression like this is just a waste of time."

Unable to come to a proper understanding with Uwe, she couldn't help but take an indifferent stature to him. And not just that. Apparently, acting as a maid wasn't working out just as much. Just as Uwe stated, a displeased expression was filling her beautiful face.

"What happened with you, Grete. That's not like you at all."

Zibia called out to the girl in a worry, to which Grete shook her head.

"...No, I cannot talk back because of something trivial such as this."

"Hm? What are you on about?"

"...Whenever I talk with a male besides the boss, I can feel my stomach cramping."

"Seriously, what are you on about?"

What an unexpected weakness. As a result, the three of them were just toyed with by Uwe.

That night, in a private room for the servants.

"Hey, Lily."

"Yes..."

"We came here to protect that guy, right?"

"That is how it is, yes..."

Not even feeling like taking a shower, the two of them just relaxed their exhausted bodies on the bed. At night, they were supposed to set up wiretaps inside the residence, but they didn't have the endurance for that. During noon, they were forced to run around like errand girls in their maid work, only able to collapse once their day ended. Uwe would not give them any time to relax.

Then, they heard a knock on the window. Opening the curtains, Sara stood there, with her usual mission attire, wearing a newsboy cap on her head.

"Good work today." She got up inside the room. "Oh, what about Grete-senpai?"

"She's not feeling well, so she's sleeping next doors."

"Eh, is she sick?"

"Well, sick in a certain way, I figure."

If I talk to another man besides the Boss, my whole body screams in agony—she had told them with a pale face. Like her motivation at the beginning of the mission had vanished completely. Right as Zibia was worried about her comrade, Sara took out a huge object.

"I finally found a deserted hut, so I'm here to give ya some support."

"Support?" Lily pushed up her body, her expression slightly more energetic from before.

That was the one thing she wanted the most.

"This guy here." Sara said, pulling off the covers of the object she brought with her.

What appeared beneath that was a metallic bird cage. Feeling a strong gaze from inside that cage, both Zibia and Lily audibly gulped.

""A falcon...?"

Greeting them was a falcon caged inside. With a solid build, it had a masculine gaze.

"Give It letters or anything else you want to send off. It'll bring them straight to my hut. I can ask him to send you anything you need as well."

As if to agree along Sara's words, the falcon picked at the cage, resounding in a loud sound.

"....."

Zibia pointed at the falcon.

"This guy is going to stay in our room...?"

"It's not 'This guy'. His name is Mr Bernard."

"Bernard..."

"Ah, but, I have to warn you. He needs special food, at least two times a day, so don't forget about that, aight? Call him by his name several times, properly brush his wings in the morning, and—" Sara puffed out her chest in confidence as she explained it like that bird was a small kitty.



Watching this Sara from the side, Zibia opened up the cage, picking up the falcon—

“Annoying!”

She opened up the window, and threw the falcon right out the window.

“Mr Bernard!?!” Sara let out a shriek.

Having been forced to take cruel animal abuse from Zivia, Bernard just did what a bird like him would do, and just soared into the darkness of the night sky. If Sara’s explanation was true, he was probably heading back to her hut. As Sara watched after the falcon with a hurt expression, Zibia called out to her.

“I mean, we snuck in here already, and it’d be weird if a maid suddenly kept a pet with her, right?”

If a bird’s chirp was heard from someone passing by, it would be found immediately.

“Ah...that was a blind spot, aight.”

“You got no wireless transceiver or something? We’ll be doing a lot of kitchen work, so something that is waterproof. Small enough that we can hide it somewhere in our clothes if possible.”

“T-That would have been possible with Annette-senpai, but right now...”

Annette—An ashen-pink-haired girl part of the Peculiar Deeds Squad, especially proficient with anything related to devices and machinery. But, she was not here. Knowing that she couldn’t be of help, Sara cats her face downward.

“Ah sorry. I wasn’t trying to blame you or anything...” Zibia panicked a bit, waving her hands.

She was just trying to think of an alternative in this situation, but that made it sound like she was dissatisfied with Sara’s work. The question in person did cheer up a bit, but her expression was still gloomy.

The three of them all let out a sigh at the same time.

“It’s not working out, is it. How can we really challenge the mission.” Lily commented, her expression tired.

“M-Maybe someone other than me would have been better, aye...” Sara said, about to break out in tears. “If it was Monika-senpai, or Tia-senpai, it would have gone much better...”

“.....”

Hearing the names of their other allies, Zibia softly bit into her lips. Sara’s words, only directed at herself, still stabbed Zibia right into the chest.

At that moment, they heard the fast footsteps of someone approaching the room. Sara panicked a bit, hiding beneath the bed, barely in time to make it before the door swung wide open.

“What happened? I just heard something that sounded like a scream.”

She apparently had heard Sara’s scream of despair.

“Ahh...” Zibia scratched her cheek.

“Chief, I’m sorry. An insect jumped inside, and that scared me.”

“Really~ Just because of an insect, how unseemly.” Olivia showed a pout.

Zibia observed the woman's appearance. Looking at the time, she would have assumed that Olivia would be wearing her sleeping attire, but contrary to that, she was still in her maid uniform. Hardworking as always.

"Chief, are you locking up right now? Should we take over?"

"Sure am. But it's fine, I can't exactly leave this to newbies, can I." Olivia declined the offer in a slight bashful manner.

Aiming for the moment where the girl had relaxed—

"Another insect!" Zibia screamed.

"Hya?!" Olivia clung to her, letting out an unladylike voice.

From the looks of it, she was bad with insects, flapping her legs up and down in fear, only realizing that there was no insect a bit later, letting out a sigh.

"I-I'll go to bed now! You keep it quiet, okay!" With a beet red face, Olivia left the room.

She was clearly embarrassed from being in fear from an insect. Lily, as well as Sara, who crawled forth from beneath the bed, both gave Zibia a suspicious look, most likely wondering why she had scared Olivia just there. Without blatantly answering that, Zibia just flashed what she had in her hand.

"A key...?" Lily blinked.

"—Already stole it."

Sne snatched it during that one moment when Olivia clung to her. Zibia followed this up by taking out a book from her bag, the book being completely hollow inside. She had a gun stocked up in there as well, but that wasn't her goal. Instead, it was the clay. Pushing the key inside, she took it's form, creating a fake. The real one she only had to return later now.

"No more hesitating, and let's just go simple with this, alright? Basically, we just have to get this old man shut up, right? Best to do that with grasping a weakness of his."

It was awfully assertive of a tactic, but the easiest method in this scenario. Now that things were not getting smoothly, they had to go out of their way.

"I'll sneak in, and take care of this all at once." With her usual commanding, confidence gaze, Zibia stuck out her tongue.

The following night, Zibia acted. Making sure that nobody spotted her, she arrived at the library, opening the door with the duplicated key.

That library room was filled with a sea of books everywhere. Nothing was put in order, because that would take a single person at least a day, if not more. There wasn't even any space to move, as the floor was filled just as much.

Looking through here, I should be able to find a weakness or two.

Putting a small flashlight in the form of a pen in her mouth, Zibia speed-read through the various books revolving around money or health. Even if she couldn't find anything about tax evasion or any debts, there should be

any sort of mistake in there she could use. Maybe even something on his health-side that they could extort him.

To that, she found a letter about a medical diagnosis from quite recently. But, inside of it was no acute note. Maybe it was not given out, or just thrown away immediately. She only found the name of the hospital.

Opening up more and more documents, her eyes suddenly ran over a rather familiar word to her.

—An orphanage.

Ignoring the mission for a moment, she opened it up. They weren't official documents, but rather a personal report book of Uwe's. Looking at the pictures, it was after the World War, as skinny children were shown on the film, telling of poor nutrition. Right after the war with no vegetables and meat at their disposal, Uwe apparently sent them some supplies. According to Zibia's memories, the orphanage where her little sisters were at also—

"What are you doing here!"

An angered roar surprised Zibia from behind.

Not good...

She had her guard down. Turning around, fully aware of her failure, she was greeted by an enraged Uwe, slapping his hand on the light switch. The resulting light slowly illuminated the room, together with Uwe carefully walking through the mountain of books, approaching Zibia. On the way, he picked up a rifle, leaning against the wall. Yet again, he pointed the muzzle of the gun at Zibia.

"So you really are an assassin, huh?!"

"No, I'm really not!"

Zibia raised both hands, denying any signs of resisting.

"Think about it, how could an adorable maid like me be an assassin."

"Your glare resembles the one of a devil!"

"Ouch?"

Whilst retorting, Zibia started running her head on how to get out of this situation. But, before she could come up with anything, Uwe gave her a dubious look.

"You have interest in those documents?"

His gaze was directed at the reports in Zibia's hands. She subconsciously lifted her hands whilst still holding onto that.

"...I guess." Zibia played along.

"For what reason?"

"It's for my studies—"

"No...no reason to ask that."

Uwe finally lowered the gun. Her beet red face was slowly starting to calm down.

"They're just some documents. Go ahead and read them."

"Huh...?" She was forgiven that easily.

Even though she didn't try to cover it up yet.

"The time I arrived at that orphanage, I heard a certain story."

In the face of Zibia's bewildered reaction, Uwe sat down on a nearby chair, starting his talk.

"Eight years ago, I think. Through the post-war chaos, the times of the gangs rising up was on our plate. From fraud with treatment on war injuries, stealing furniture at the houses of the owners having passed away, they ain't doing much different now, but that time it was much more prominent." His way of telling was calm, like he was retelling a fairy tale.

"Especially a gang called 'Man-eaters' was horrible. They were doing their shenanigans in the capital, killing people just for fun. Especially the leader, he's disappearing like a ghost, only to reappear to stab a knife in your heart. A man that left both police and citizens in fear, like a descendant of the devil."

"....."

"That being said, the leader was suddenly arrested, and the 'Man-eaters' collapsed. You know the reason?"

".....I wonder?"

"The eldest daughter of that leader reported him to the police." Uwe said, sounding like he was praising that decision. "Wonderful, isn't it? In order to protect her little sisters and brothers, the nine-year old girl chose justice over everything."

"....."

"These siblings were safely taken in at an orphanage, but right after, the eldest daughter disappeared. To earn money, wasn't it. What a courageous young lady. Rumours had it that she started working under a detective in the capital, or faking her age to work at a textiles factory...I can't help but think of this as a moving tale." Finishing his tale, Uwe let out a huge sigh. In response, Zibia just shrugged her shoulders.

"Why tell me all of that?"

"That eldest daughter apparently is a rather arrogant and commanding white-haired girl. Seeing you, I was just reminded of that. She must be at your age right now as well. I think her name was—"

Uwe spoke of a certain name. A vulgar name, as if to reflect the personality of the parent.

"...Doesn't ring a bell."

"Huh. Sorry to press that much." Uwe snorted in a disappointed manner. Receiving the report back from Zibia, he ran his eyes through it once more, licking his dry lips.

"That being said, you should know about it, right? How cruel of an environment a post-war orphanage back then was. The supplies affordable were at the bare limit, the welfare facilities not having anything left. I tried my best, but the government focussed more on economic policies and the development of the country."

"Yeah, I know fully well..."

"Situation hasn't changed in the slightest. Even if I hammer on the desk, only a small portion of the welfare guys even raise an eyebrow." Uwe's

voice grew quiet. “—That is why I’m trying to avoid any unnecessary waste of money, so that I can send them even just a little bit.”

“.....”

That was the reason for the excessive economising personality, the root of his entire being. Even if it was just a temporary piece of mind, he was gathering small amounts of money on a daily basis. Thinking that he is a Vice Minister of the Cabinet, this thought process just sounds so noble. And Zibia could perfectly understand that urge he had.

“That is why you’re ordering the maids to always save as much money as possible...”

She had the wrong idea about him. He wasn’t just some senile old man.

“I get it. From now on, I’ll try to adjust to that philosophy—”

“No, that is not what I meant to tell you with this.”

“Hm?”

“Read as much as you want this evening. I won’t question anything about this.”

Zibia was still confused. But, Uwe gave her an explanation right after.

“—Because you’ll be going home tomorrow.”

“Huh?” A flabbergasted voice leaked out of Zibia’s mouth.

She thought he was jesting, but his expressions were as serious as it could be.

“Employing you because of an act of kindness for another politician is still too much of a waste. Neither do I need three girls. Once noon passes tomorrow, you will leave.”

Her breathing had stopped. To think that he had decided on this after such a short time already. If everybody was fired, they had no chances of successfully clearing the mission.

“W-Wait a second. The state of the residence will suffer dramatically if we’re gone.”

“If the guests help cleaning, it should be fine. Olivia on her own can manage.”

“That’s still too extre—”

“I told you before. I cannot afford any unnecessary expenses. No matter how trivial it may be.” Uwe’s decision had been set in stone.

An iron will resided in his gaze, not bending no matter what Zibia would say now. It pained her to admit it, she could only give up.

“...Then, let me ask one thing.” Zibia spoke up. “If you hate any unnecessary expenses that much, why won’t you sell this luxurious residence?”

Apparently, Uwe didn’t take that question very well, as he narrowed his eyes in a glare.

“This residence was always hard to reach. It won’t sell for much.”

“Besides that, it’s a countermeasure against assassins?”

The enemy wouldn’t use methods that pulled in random people. That was nothing but a bother for spies.

Uwe gave consent.

"I cannot die just yet. The welfare of this country still needs me."
Zibia's cheeks softened.

"Is that so. Then, I cannot afford to get fired just yet."

Turning her back to Uwe, Zibia dashed out of the library. Their time limit was about twelve hours from now on. Until then, they had to find a reason that stopped Uwe from firing them. Additionally, Zibia finally understood the reason she was chosen by Ron. Because she had the duty to protect Uwe at all costs.

Lily and Grete were sporting with the falcon in the servant room. Seeing how he was well-built, with a strong gaze, they were left in admiration. Sara brought the falcon over yet again. Last time, he was chased out by Zibia, but for the other two, who had broken spirits and hearts, an animal kind to humans was like they were being healed. Next to them was Sara, once again talking proudly about it.

"You see, Mr Bernard likes—"

They were planning on holding a serious strategy meeting, but Zibia hadn't returned yet. Hence, they had to wait, making themselves busy with brushing the wings of the falcon.

Eventually, footsteps were heard outside in the hallway. The door to the room opened, Zibia entering with a strained expression. It looked like a mixture of regret, and determination.

"How was it? Did you get some great information for us—"

"Nope, Uwe-san spotted me." Zibia just blatantly shook her head.

The other girls swiftly grasped the situation, lowering their heads at the same time.

""""Thanks for your hard work.""""

"I wasn't fired just yet, you bastards!"

The girls had jumped to conclusions, earning themselves an angry roar from Zibia. But, after Zibia revealed the actual circumstances, it turned out they weren't far off too much. Not just Zibia would suffer from this, but all three together would be fired at this rate.

"Ain't that quite the pinch?" Sara's expression distorted in despair.

Zibia gave her consent, and dropped the tone of her voice.

"I wanna talk about my life story here a bit."

"Hm? With this kind of timing?" Lily tilted her head in confusion.

"Just listen, alright. There was actually a time when I was attending an orphanage with my little sisters and brothers, said orphanage being as poor as you could imagine. That really ticked me off, so I aimed to be a spy, to change this world even if only a little. In a certain sense, this is pretty close to Uwe-san's ambition." Zibia laughed at herself. "That's why I'm really happy right now...That guy...Sensei, he's properly taught about me."

Casting her face downward for a second, the next time she lifted her head again, light had returned to her eyes.

"I want to answer Sensei's expectations, and I want to protect Uwe-san. So please, help me out." She still sounded as commanding and confident. The other girls were unable to grasp where that passion exactly came from. They could fairly imagine what had happened, but Zibia showed no signs to give the details, so they didn't pursue it any further. The enthusiasm in her eyes, burning strong like a flame, was more than enough.

"Well, this is a mission after all, so of course we'd help you." Lily was the first to speak up.

"That's true, but..." Zibia grew slightly flustered.

"U-Um."

That was where Sara timidly raised her hand.

"I can sympathize with Zibia-senpai's feelings. I'm a coward, a good-for-nothing, and I still spend my time thinking that it would have been better if someone else had been chosen." She stopped herself, taking a deep breath.

"But, I was still really happy when I was chosen."

Seemingly embarrassed by this confession, Sara blushed ever so slightly, whereas Lily showed a confident grin.

"You two are so easy~ I was totally sure I would be chosen. Thinking about it rationally, there's no way that the leader could be missing on an important mission such as this."

"Lily-senpai, I heard you screaming in joy from your room."

"So she says, Lily."

Lily's smile froze up.

"...I-I always scream out like that, every day."

"What kind of practice is that?"

Grete watched her comrades, slightly giggling.

"What's wrong?" Zibia asked.

"...I was just thinking that the Boss probably saw through everyone's feelings, and picked us as a result of that..."

"Fell for him all over again?"

"No...just as expected...An expected charm of his..." Grete spoke fondly of her beloved person. "...And, I also want to respond to Boss' expectations."

"Figures."

The four girls met gazes at the same time, confirming their feelings, and started their strategy meeting.

"And, how can we avoid getting fired?" Lily grinned. "Threatening?"

"What do the others think?" Zibia sought more ideas.

"...Disguise as Olivia-san, and try to give us a good reputation...?"

"Poison Uwe-san, and then gallantly save him to earn us a favor?"

"If it was me, I'd try negotiating with everybody but Uwe-san."

Starting with Grete, Lily and Sara both gave their own ideas. There was Grete's sophisticated plan, Lily's underhanded plan, and Sara's careful plan. In response to that, Zibia flashed her white teeth.

"I'll make some delicious food, and have him accept me as a maid."

"Phew, heavy work." Lily clapped her hands together. "But, I like it. Sounds like Zibia-chan."

She found no reason to obstruct that. Their heads still together, the four girls started smiling.

"Now, It's time for my cooking revenge match. Now that I got some intelligence on him—"

".....Yay!" A muffled voice came from Grete.

"Eh, what was that?"

"...I wanted to go along with your high tension...so I..."

"You don't have to force yourself?"

"Y-Yay, aye!"

"So this is how we look in your eyes, huh?" Lily showed a bitter smile.

It was a ridiculous conversation, but Zibia cut in between.

"Now that we've been entrusted with this, we have to give it our all!"

The four girls bumped their foreheads together in a weak attempt to get motivated.

They split up into two teams. The morning of the following day, Grete and Lily stood in the kitchen of the residence. Lining up the ingredients they had just bought first thing, they crossed their arms.

"Is cooking something delicious really going to give us a break-out from this situation?" A bit late, but Lily started to have some doubts.

"We just have to put trust into Zibia-san..."

What Grete had lined up in the kitchen was a wide variety of spices. Red pepper, pepper, pink peppercorn, cardamom, ginger, all of them in a great number.

"We will have to start preparing...Lily-san."

"Yes! Leave the tasting to me!" Lily puffed out her chest in confidence.

She had confidence in her job, after having been giving this heavy duty the last time they tried to defeat Ron.

"...Why would you do the tasting, Lily-san?" Grete just stopped her.

"Fueh?"

"With the recipe, you measure the ingredients, cut them, heat them up, mix them, boil them—No matter how you think about it, Lily-san, proficient in the use of poison, should be skilled at this sort of thing..."

"....."

"You hadn't realized? Were your eyes lost in greed the last time by any—"

"Keep this a secret from Zibia-chan!"

With these words, Lily started working on the spices. Carefully grinding them, taking out the parts with weak fragrance, picking out the prominent corns. Being skilled at this sort of thing, she showed no wasted movement, so Grete nodded along in a satisfying manner.

"...Normally, this sort of preparation takes about two hours, but let's try to do it in half an hour."

"D-Don't ask for the impossible!"

"I will give you guidance, so it's very much possible..."

Ignoring the complaints of her partner, Grete started her detailed calculations. Relying on that, Lily had no trouble taking care of the rest.

Zibia and Sara on their end were traversing the outskirts of the capital. Riding on the two motorbikes they borrowed, they progressed down the path, which actually had received maintenance recently. Though they wouldn't be able to make it in time if they daddled around too much, luckily, although the Republic of Deen was a rather small country, they had proper and maintained paths around the capital, or even a high-way running along. The place Zibia and Sara stopped at was a big facility, a representative state-managed hospital. It stood on solid ground, a five-floor large brick building, almost like a castle. Not knowing where she was even taken to, Sara opened her eyes wide.

"Eh, here?"

"Yeah. Apparently, Uwe-san got his diagnosis from this place." Zibia took off her helmet. "The results of that were not in the residence, so we can only ask the hospital here."

"So get access to his diagnosis."

"No, I doubt that would work. We'd need proof that he sent us, and we don't have the time."

What the two aimed for was the report of Uwe's diagnosis. In order to persuade Uwe, that would most likely be essential. That being said, getting it into their hands would not be easy. Sara looked slightly worried, but Zibia just flashed an invincible grin.

"That's why—we'll be stealing it from here."

"This is a state-managed hospital, you know?!" Sara's expression froze up.

"Shh. Not so loud."

"B-But, the security has to be top-notch! With lots of people working there..."

"Izz fine, izz fine. The bigger it is, the easier it is to sneak in. I'll steal a key to the changing room, disguise myself as a nurse, and look for the documents from the shelves, all there is to it." Zibia waved her hand in confidence. "Once I give the sign, have Bernard fly over to cause a bit of a ruckus, that should be enough to get me out." Zibia started preparing herself with some light calisthenics.

"....." Sara could only watch this in silence for a moment.

Finally, she seemed to have given in, sighing with a *What a helpless Senpai, alright...* Then again, more than being fed-up, she looked like she was enjoying herself. Whistling with her fingers, a falcon came soaring down from the sky, stopping right next to Sara.

"I can give him a concrete route, not just the timing, if ya need it."

"That'd be a great help."

Finishing her preparations at the same time, Jibia announced in her usual commanding tone.

“Codename [Hyakki] — I’ll make this a time to brag in snatching.”

With these words, she entered the hospital. In the end, Sara stayed on stand-by outside, unable to see what was going on inside the actual building. She didn’t know about the girl’s origin, why she had honed her talent to such a level, and what led her to end up at [Tomoshibi]. However, there was one thing she knew for certain.

The girl Zibia, carrying the name of [Hyakki] — is a genius at stealing.

Noon that day, the cooking was finished. Following Grete’s instructions, Lily managed to tie together a stuffed cabbage. Instead of the pork, they used liver and other intestines. To hide that stench, they didn’t use white sauce, but rather an ethnic soup with lots of spices. Finally, Lily gave it a bit of tasting, and judged it to be perfect. However, there was one big problem in it all—Zibia hadn’t returned yet.

...We cannot wait any longer, can we.

Lily judged this, and carried the stuffed cabbage over to the dining room. She had confidence in her dish, nobody would dislike this. However, Uwe yet again went against their plans.

“Disgusting!”

“Eh...?”

“It is better than yesterday’s food, but I cannot eat this! You go eat it instead!”

His expression tightened up, as he spit out the food onto the plate. All he ate after that was the dry bread, and not with the greatest enjoyment either. Dinner finished rather quickly because of that.

Lily was still a bit bewildered, and tried another bite of the food she cooked, but she couldn’t find any complaints with it. Maybe that old man just had unmatchable high desires.

Uwe snorted, and crossed his arms.

“Hmpf, it doesn’t matter. In the end, you all will be fi—”

“—No, it definitely should be delicious. That cooking.”

As Lily turned around, she saw Zibia standing in the door frame, her shoulders moving up and down as she was out of breath. She must have hurried back, crossing her limits.

“Hey, Uwe-san. Maybe you should stop being so selfish, and just eat up for once?”

“What are you...”

“I saw the results of your blood tests at the hospital. The number of your red blood cells are significantly lower than they should be, right. A case of vitamin shortage.” Zibia announced. “You were considering it, right? That you suffer from taste disorder.”

“...! Don’t be ridiculous!” Uwe returned a scream of rage. “How dare you assume that I suffer from taste disorder—”

“You are the only person who called this dish ‘Disgusting’, you know? Of course we’d get dubious.” Zibia kept her glare at Uwe, continuing her

words. "After the World War, you were saving so much money without regard to your own body. In the documents last night, there was a picture, right. You would visit orphanages post-war, giving them food. So that even the poor kids could get something to eat. A noble act, but weren't you going too far?" Zibia narrowed her eyes. "You even donated your own food, right?"

"Hmpf, and what exactly is wrong with that?"

"Everything. You didn't get the necessary nutrients that your body needs. That's why you got this taste disorder. With an unbalanced diet, it got worse and worse. So much that you can't even taste anything anymore."

Lily remembered that Uwe only ate bread all the time, even though he made it look disgusting. Not exactly a balanced diet.

"Lily, tell me. What did Uwe-san say about that dish just now."

"That it was better than yesterday's."

"I thought so. He can't taste anything, but that means he'll appreciate food with more spices in it." Zibia showed a victorious smile.

"Uwe-san, there's no need for an assassin to stop by. At this rate, you'll die either way."

"....."

"Hire us. We won't let you call us a 'waste' anymore. We'll make balanced and nutritious meals for you, so that your taste comes back, and then treat you to something really delicious." Though Zibia's voice was still a bit out of breath, it had a soft, kind tone to it.

—I want you to eat some delicious food.

She didn't say these words to treat him to something exceptional, but just get him back a daily joy he had lost. Straightforward, just like she always would act. At the very least, that's how Lily felt.

Uwe on his end just closed his mouth, gritting his teeth. He took back the plate with the stuffed cabbage, and took a bite. Yet again, his face tightened up.

"...It's just as you said." He sighed. "Naturally, I realized it. But now it makes sense...taste disorder, huh..."

"If you got a hunch, why didn't you do anything."

"I didn't want to admit my age...that's another reason for it, right?"

"Most likely."

"Stop. You know it, so just spit it out." Uwe's cheeks softened.

He showed the first calm smile the girls had seen so far.

"But, Zibia...even so, I have to avoid any unnecessary expenses." Uwe announced. "It's not just the orphanages. There are still too many people in this country who finish their dinner with but a slice of bread. What would the world think if they knew that I was employing four maids, even though I advertise welfare."

"...You really are a noble politician." Zibia shrugged her shoulders. "Then, just fire one of us. With that, we'll still be able to do our job, if only barely."

That probably was the best compromise for both parties. Uwe would keep his trust as a politician, whereas the girls could focus on their work as spies. After giving this idea a short moment of silence, Uwe nodded deeply. Thus, thanks to Zibia's work, two dismissals were avoided. With one person less, the mission continued.

Around an hour-long footwalk from the yashiki, she finally made it to the town she aimed for. Zibia sighed ever so slightly, heading towards the location she had been named. It was a cigarette store in the corner of the town, small and dirty like a miscellaneous shop. Entering inside probably filled the capacity of possible customers. Windows existed in that small store, but because of the packages of cigarettes or juice cans, you couldn't see inside.

Ron sat at the counter, hiding half his face with a newspaper. Even inside his home country, he did not plan on letting down his guard at all. Speaking honestly, Zibia didn't know too well what exactly he was doing. Might be off collecting information on his own.

"I received the report from Grete." Ron spoke up. "I heard you did some wonderful working there. She praised you."

"Why thanks." Zibia shook her head. "But, I still got dismissed. Sorry about that."

The ones allowed to continue as maids were Grete and Lily. Once the question arrived as to who would be fired, Zibia took the step forward, and offered to be the one. Though he was a bit dissatisfied with that, Zibia's decision was written on stone.

"I see, but your work to win over Lord Uwe was wonderful."

"...Well, it wasn't all my work alone"

"Is that so?"

"It's thanks to the hint you gave me."

Ron didn't seem like he was able to remember what Zibia was talking about.

"I was always wondering about that. I tried making stuffed cabbage the same way you did it. Yet, no matter what I did, yours was just always more delicious."

Even after she failed, she gave it a lot of thought. Where the difference was, even though she used the same methods, same ingredients. As an explanation, she came up with plenty.

"Do you remember how you served the stuffed cabbage?"

"Barely."

"After splitting it up onto eight plates, you gave it some more seasoning."

Zibia didn't miss that. If he wanted to change the taste of the entire dish, he could have used the sauce. However, Ron seasoned every single plate individually.

"You thought of everyone's nutrition, adding vinegar or spices."

Of course, that was just another explanation. If Ron's own action happened subconsciously, there was no way to find definite proof. He might have just

been adding his own preferences. But, Sara said it—That it gave her body a joyful sensation. He gave proper consideration to everyone's health. That idea had remained in Zibia's head.

"Well, I try to give a bossy explanation, but I still got fired in the end. Then again, at least not all three of us did, so give me that passing mark, alright?"

"....."

For a while, Ron didn't say a word. His expression didn't reveal anything. Would she be reprimanded, would he be disappointed. This was the first time she had to report the failure of a job. She didn't know what kind of reaction he would show, so her body was filled with tension.

"I apologize for messing up like that." Zibia pushed her body forwards.

"But, I'll recover. Giving them support, I'll help in bringing the mission to a success."

"No." Ron opened his mouth. "You don't understand."

"!"

They were cold words, containing no emotions, not even as he continued.

"We have enough support with Sara. Outside the residence, I'm on stand-by as well. Any more than that is not needed."

"That's..." Zibia felt her blood drain from her face.

To think she would be denied this far.

"...I know I'm pathetic, but please." Zibia gave Ron a resolute gaze. "Give me one more chance. This time, I'll definitely—"

"There is something I'd like to ask you now." Ron took a step forward. "How long do I have to join this child's play?"

"Huh?" A baffled voice leaked out of Zibia's mouth.

He pointed out her mistake in a more moderate manner than he normally would.

"You seem to have a misunderstanding here." Ron narrowed his eyes, but sent a kind gaze towards Zibia. "Why would I abandon an excellent subordinate of mine. Recovery? That doesn't make any sense. You did not make a single mistake there. Act as support? Not needed. You should be at the front line." Ron announced. "Marvelous—That is the only possible evaluation I can give here."

"Eh..."

Apparently, she was praised. But, rather than feel happy, Zibia couldn't quite accept this.

"Didn't I tell you? I got fired, I can't go back to—"

"You can. Sell yourself even more to Mr Uwe."

"Eh? Sell myself?"

"A taste disorder according to his lack of vitamins—Was that the only disorder he had?"

Zibia tilted her head, slightly bewildered. Does that mean that there was something else? Short temper. His crude side? He probably wasn't talking about anything personality-related.

Now that she thought about it, the first time he ran into Zibia and the others, he had said something odd. At the entrance of the residence during the sunset, he assumed that a girl with completely different hair-color was Olivia's little sister. When he found Zibia in the library at night, he couldn't walk until he turned on the lights.

"—Don't tell me, Nyctalopia?"

"That might be another part of it."

A disorder that worsened the ability to see drastically once it got dark—Nyctalopia. Or in the common word, night blindness. Another disorder caused by a lack of vitamins. Taste disorder because of an unbalanced diet. Since the diagnosis was made it an openly-lit room, the doctor didn't catch on to it.

Yet, Ron deduced that just from hear-say. No, that shouldn't be possible. He must have watched the interior of the residence in some way.

"Lord Uwe always drives to his own meetings, but as things stand, he would be better off being escorted. In a situation like this, he can't possibly call it a waste." Ron announced.

"Hurry on back to the residence. Your simple honesty is needed for the team."

Following up these words, Ron took out a juice can from the desk, opening up the lid with the corner of said desk, and handed it over to Zibia. Taking a look inside, she saw that it was cider, which she accepted gratefully. Even though it was such a simple present, Zibia couldn't help but grin at it. He was properly watching her. Though he wasn't putting into words most of the time, he admitted the efforts of the girls.

"You really are amazing. Yet again, I can't help but admire ya."

—And that's why I was happy to be chosen for this mission.

Though she swallowed the latter part of her words, she took a sip from the cider.

"Thanks for that. I'll repay you double for this."

Ron narrowed his eyes. And after that, Zibia restarted her work as a driver maid.

In the blink of time, two weeks passed. The gathering of information was moving along smoothly.

"Your driving has a lot of unnecessary styling in it. Keep it running more calmly!"

"Shut it! If you keep blabbering, you'll bite your tongue!"

Exchanging poison between the other, Uwe and Zibia made it home to the residence. Rather than a master and maid relationship, it looked more like a cheeky grandchild, and a stiff, thickheaded grandfather, but since Uwe was indifferent to politeness, he didn't bother to complain, as long as she didn't waste any money.

"Also, who was that guy that called out to me today? He gave me that dubious stare."

"An old friend. Nobody you have to be wary about."

"Alright then."

"You get angry at the smallest things. Maybe he was just wondering about you being rather young as a driver?"

"How rude. I properly got my license...though not officially."

"Hm? Did you say something towards the end?"

As soon as Zibia started acting as the driver for Uwe, she managed to gather more information on him. She would always be with him if he went out, able to watch over him, protect him if needed. Uwe on his end started to soften up a bit as well, allowing the girls easier spy activities. Besides anybody inside the residence, anyone that came and left, they looked into thoroughly. Listening in on any conversations in the toilet, or reception hall, Sara could tail anybody outside if necessary.

"Still, day after day has ended, but we didn't find anybody suspicious." Zibia quietly called out to Lily, who was preparing a midnight snack.

"There's nothing happening inside the residence either. Not necessarily a bad thing though." She returned with a lax voice.

"Yeah." Zibia agreed.

They were a bit resentful in the beginning, forced to work as maids, but now they felt comfortable with it. Uwe was a politician who worked towards an ideal world, and even if he had his rough parts, he was a noble person. They had no complaints about working as his maids, if it took some load of his shoulders. That's why they hoped that this assassin would never arrive, that these days would continue.

—But, the both of them knew that the world wouldn't be this kind.

A scream, coming from the garden. It sounded like a female. But not Grete. Older than that. Most likely, Olivia.

Zibia and Lily started running at the same time. Following that, heavy footsteps came down the stairs.

"Olivia?! What happened!"

Uwe. Holding his pride and joy, the rifle, he came running in his sleeping attire. Though they wished he'd refrain from being reckless like that, it helped that the target of their protection was with them. Running after Uwe, Zibia and Lily ran towards the garden. What greeted them was Olivia, on her behind, as she had fallen to the ground.

With a pale expression, she pointed at the sky.

"T-That..." Olivia's voice was shaking. "From there...a bullet..."

Zibia reflexively directed her gaze over there. Standing there was a tall tree, with what looked like a person at the very tip, holding a rifle.

"What the heck is that..." Zibia groaned.

—A birthmark.

Though the person had been wearing a hoodie, the full moon shone down, showing the mouth of them. A birthmark enough to cover the mouth. It looked like a scald. Muddy-black, changing the color of the skin. Almost like a corpse. The girls remembered the details about the mission.

—That is...[Shikabane]...?

"I feel sick..." Olivia let out a groan.

Just by looking at that person, one felt the contents of the dinner come up again, a horrific mark.

"Eat this!"

As the girls were left in bewilderment, Uwe readied his weapon, shooting. Unexpectedly, that old man was quite courageous. However, [Shikabane] didn't have to dodge, as the bullet hit the tree beneath him. The night blindness really showed here. As Shikabane jumped off the tree, they vanished into the darkness of the thicket.

The girls hesitated for one second.

"We'll chase after them. Uwe-san, go back inside with Olivia-san, and call the police."

Stealing the rifle from Uwe, Zibia and the others followed into the thicket. Though normal maids would not be acting like that by any means, they couldn't let this chance to go waste either. Either kill, catch the perpetrator, or in the worst case, gain any sort of information that could allow them investigation. Right as they decided on these measures, it happened when they set foot into the thicket.

Zibia's feet got caught in wires. But, as soon as she sought help from Lily, she suffered from the same fate. A classical trap. Skillfully set up in the darkness. Not to mention that both girls got caught, that took quite some skill. Almost like the moves of the girls were anticipated.

The wires were pulled up, the two of them floating in mid-air. Nothing they could grab to set themselves free. They weren't even given the time to use the tools in their skirts. If they were shot now, they would not be able to evade it.

The worst-case scenario ran through their heads. They heard the screams of Uwe and Olivia.

Death.

"—Marvelous."

Right as they had prepared themselves, a familiar voice rang out, the wires getting cut. Zibia's legs were freed, and she landed safely on the ground.

Lily on the other hand landed butt-first, letting out a shriek.

"So it has started, huh." Ron said, a knife in his hand.

His eyes were looking into the pitch-black darkness of the forest.

"Zibia, Lily, prepare yourselves. The assassin has started to move." With these words, he vanished like he hadn't been there in the first place.

Thus, the battle between [Tomoshibi] and [Shikabane] started.

1 Previously [Information Gathering Squad]

2 [100 Demons], most likely

3 [Prairie]

Chapter 3: Exposure

This incident happened in the past.

In hindsight of the Impassable Mission, Grete received intensive practice from Ron. Facing each other at a table, they looked like they had an intense game of chess. Instead of the chess board, they had the layout of Uwe's residence in front of them.

"Lord Uwe's location is the reception hall. 2pm. I'll come in disguised as a delivery worker, hiding A inside my pocket—"

"...Let me think, first I would have Sara-san check for firearms with her animal—"

A simulation.

A practice relying only on her quick wits. Ron would be acting as the assassin, and Grete had to think of how to move her allies and herself in order to avoid that. It was very much comparable to chess, as one announced their movements, moving the pieces on the desk.

In accordance with that, Grete managed to corner Ron. Confiscating the weapon, he was pushed into the corner of the residence. So far, there had been no problems, or so she thought—

"There, I reveal item A that I had in my pocket."

Ron revealed a memo. Written on there were the objects he had delivered. He had prepared himself to such a level.

Grete let out a sigh. In the end, the assassin had been the winner, as the pieces of her allies had all fallen over.

"Not bad." Ron gave an acceptable evaluation. "Let's do it one more time. How about it?"

"Yes, of course..."

Changing the setting, they could fight again right away. Lining up the pieces, Grete spoke up.

"...With this, the burden on the Boss is less than during our normal practice..."

"No, just imagining and actual battle are different. Not to mention that I can't explain the small details."

For example, when Grete said 'Zibia-san will attack from the back', he would give a vague 'I deal with it like a tiger', leaving Grete in confusion. However, speaking in mere efficiency, a simulation like this was more than valuable. In just one night, she could fight with Ron tens of times, and gain experience through defeat.

"By the way, a question—"

In between, they would put ordinary conversation. It was equally a time for Ron to take a break, and drink some tea. Grete nodded along first.

"...Yes, the color of my underwear today is—"

"I wasn't asking that."

"—White."

"Don't just force through your answer." Ron sighed in disbelief.

Apparently, she had received advice from a certain ally to 'Bring up sexual topics more often'. Not doubting that in the slightest, this was the result.

And yet, she nodded along, in confidence of all things.

"I actually wanted to talk about something more serious." Ron pressed on his forehead.

"Serious?"

Grete had trouble suppressing follow-up words like 'The reservation for the wedding hall?'. Recently, she found hardship in trying to hold back her feelings. Ron himself had no idea about her thoughts whatsoever, directing a sharp gaze at him.

"—Why couldn't you show your actual skill at the educational facility?"

That really was a serious question. His gaze told her more than enough.

"Of course, I got information about you from the instructor, just like on all the other girls. Lily made a lot of mistakes, and couldn't filter into her surroundings because of her wild personality. Sara didn't have much motivation to become a spy anyway. Zibia on her part had a rough personality because of her origin."

These three were her allies on this mission. He probably revealed that to Grete.

"But, Grete. You were the only one I couldn't figure out. Just what happened?"

"....."

Apparently, he was acting considerate. It wasn't a pleasant story, but because of how he was, Grete just found herself able to talk about it.

"I am sure you would not believe me anyway..."

"No, if it's your words, I will."

"...Thank you very much."

They were reassuring words. They alone had Grete's heartbeat accelerate. Holding on to the tea cup in her hands, she opened her mouth.

"...The thing is, I have problems dealing with men."

Unexpectedly, Ron's reaction took its time. Not bringing out a voice, his expression as stiff as a rock, he only gazed at Grete. Almost as his entire body had been frozen in time.

"....."
....."
....."

The silence continued for quite some time.

"...Boss?" Grete tilted her head in confusion. "What about your promise to believe me?"

"Sorry, I just couldn't grasp what you were saying." Quite the cruel return from Ron.

"...Whenever I have a man in front of me, my stomach starts to hurt."

"It really doesn't look that way when you are in front of me though?"

"Boss is an exception."

"That sure sounds convenient." Ron didn't seem like he was satisfied.

His expression was colored in slight discontent, only for him to grow quiet again, seemingly thinking. Eventually, he muttered a short 'I did promise to believe in you' as he once again took a sip of his tea, turning his head to the side.

"Your love still is too complicated for me."

"Is that so...?"

To her, it was something natural, but he apparently still felt a bit suspicious about it. Grete didn't understand it. **Even though Ron had drastically changed the value of the human called Grete all by himself.** But, rather than explaining that now, Grete felt priority for another matter.

"I have a question of my own." Grete changed the topic.

"What is it?"

"What happened with that wound on your hand...?"

A red line ran along Ron's hand. A wound that would be unthinkable knowing him.

"Ahh, I had an emergency mission this afternoon. I was a bit careless once, but it'll heal soon."

"...This wound is only the beginning. You have to take a rest."

"Don't mind it. I have to finish the piled-up reports any—"

Grete lifted up the fountain pen from the desk, tightly embracing it with both her arms.

"...Until you take a good rest, I will not return this pen." She gazed straight at Ron.

He did raise a brow in displeasure at first, but eventually sighed, paired with a 'Marvelous', as he started cleaning up the blueprint from the residence. This meant that the practice was over.

"Alright. I'll head to bed for today. So you can—"

"Yes. I will stay with you, caressing you on your sleep—"

"Get out."

"....."

Grete couldn't even finish her words.

"Grete, you must be tired as well. I'll sleep right away, so just turn off the lights—" His words stopped mid-sentence.

As she turned around, Ron had already collapsed on the bed. His eyes were closed, as his breathing grew more calm, rhythmical. Almost like his source of energy had been cut.

".....Fast."

He couldn't afford to catch a cold, so Grete quickly put a blanket on him.

"....."

Normally, he would open his eyes the second she approached him, but he showed no signs of that this time. The fatigue must have been immense again. This was the first time he showed such a wide opening.

"...Is he letting down his guard because it's me?"

Her words were filled with a hidden desire, but no words of response came from him. She carefully took his hand. Yet, he didn't wake up.

"...Was I able to spoil him, if only a bit?"

Feeling his bulky, warm hand, Grete stayed next to him.

—Her heart started to beat faster. Just by watching his sleeping face, she felt fulfilled. Her body was filled with a warmth as if she stood beneath the dazzling sun.

She shouldn't be expecting any love in return for hers—Even if she understood this, her desires were working against her.

I don't have the slightest hope that my love will be fulfilled, but...

Grete tightly grasped his hand.

"Even so, would I be too greedy to even expect one percent of affection from him...after we successfully clear this mission, and I was able to answer his expectations...?"

This brief moment in time was unforgettable for the girl.

Once Uwe had been won over, information came flooding in. Standing at the command of it all was Grete. Whilst fulfilling her duties as a maid, she gave the other girls orders on how to proceed.

The first one to comment on this was Zibia.

"...The boss said to 'Investigate Lord Uwe like you would rub a stone at the bottom of the ocean'."

"In words that a normal person would understand?"

"Get some information about the participants of tomorrow's banquet from Uwe-san, if I had to guess."

Translating Ron' mysterious order, Zibia nodded along with a 'Gotcha', and headed to the library room.

"Sup, Uwe-san! Shouldn't we be departing soon?"

With the key to the car in hand, Zibia couldn't be more relaxed as she called out to her employer. Though Uwe scolded her with a 'Isn't that one hour too early', Zibia used her skillful words to persuade him, saying that the weather had gotten worse, so the faster the better.

Around the time they would make it back to the residence, she surely had fulfilled her work. Whilst working on the mission, she kept a favorable relationship with her employer. She truly was the vital point of the mission at this point.

Lily was working in a completely different direction from Zibia. Together with her naturally appealing looks, and a cheerful personality, she was liked

by the residents of the house. Though things didn't work too well for her in the educational facility, the people living in the residence were kind enough to overlook her mistakes. Even with any unnatural movement or actions, she wouldn't be thought of as suspicious.

"...Lily-san. I want to put up more wiretaps for the banquet, so could you gather the attention of the residents?"

"I thought you were going to say that, so I already tripped over the bucket, making the entire hallway a wet mess."

"....."

"Typical Lily-chan, reading the situation perfectly."

Though Lily formed a peace-sign with her hand, acting like she had planned this out, Olivia's scream could be heard from the hallway.

"To think she would figure it out this quickly!" She complained, running away with tears in her eyes.

Though her existence was flashy and gaudy on the outside, it allowed her comrades to work in the shadows far more easily.

Being on stand-by outside the residence, Sara was given several peculiar tasks. Using her animals, she took care of smaller jobs. She was acting humble about it, but there were a lot of jobs only she could take care of. On her way to a shopping trip at a nearby town, Grete exchanged some information with Sara.

"Sadly, I didn't find any traces from the set-up traps. My helpers couldn't pick up any scent either, so they must have had some countermeasures."

Grete had anticipated that response, so she just nodded along.

"Then, please keep your guard up the entirety of tomorrow. If you could be on stand-by near the residence..."

"Understood." Sara nodded, showing rather weak-willed eyes. "B-By the way, the chances of that assassin coming again..."

"I cannot say 'No' for certain..."

"Uuu...well, that makes sense. I'll try my best."

Slapping her own cheeks, Sara vanished into the city.

The coordination between the girls was working out fairly well.

As soon as the last car left the driveway, the residence was wrapped up in silence. The headlights illuminated the trees on the mountain, until even the headlights disappeared. All this ruckus and noise from before felt like a lie. Now the sound of the door closing behind them was the only thing filling their ears.

Grete let out a deep sigh. The banquet happening at Uwe's residence ended safely. Fully unrelated to the location of this mansion, more than 30 guests had arrived, every single one politician, the servant of such, or other important people. Rooms that hadn't been used before were open for them, which means they had to be cleaned previously, forcing the four maids to run around constantly.

Right as she relaxed her shoulders at the entrance, Grete was approached by Zibia, with a slightly troubled expression.

"Zibia-san, did something happen?"

"Ahh, a bit of a problem."

The girl pointed at the upper floor, and laughed.

"Uwe-san blew a fuse at the costs of this banquet. Well, I'm used to it at this point."

"No, that is not what I..."

Zibia nodded, telling the rest with hand signs.

'No intruders. One guy was acting a bit suspicious, but I didn't find any weapons.'

Seeing this, Grete responded of her own.

'No irregularities according to Sara-san. Not even any misses coming from Lily-san, weirdly enough.'

They finished checking their respective information. From the sounds of it, things had worked out quite well.

"It's because your instructions were perfect, Grete. That's what I expected from you. I thought the schedule wasn't going to work out at all, but it went as smooth as butter."

"No, you others should be praised for your work. I was just working behind the scenes."

Though she acted reserved on the outside, inside, she had rather strong confidence.

—Things are going well.

Even without Ron's guidance, she correctly judged the current situation, giving adequate orders to the other girls. Gathering information on the way, every single step worked towards finding the assassin. And yet, at the root of it all was but a simple desire.

...I have to help and spoil the Boss as best as possible after all.

Grete tightly put her lips together. She was working her best. Thanks to the great support from her allies, things had been going according to her calculations.

For now, she decided to head to the dining room, returning to her work as a maid. A great number of tableware was still untouched after the dinner.

They had planned on taking care of them at any time it wasn't needed anymore, but unfortunately, the amount of people was too great. Going along with Uwe's politics of just using the utmost limit of food, there was still too much left.

As Grete was busy with the cleaning, Zibia came over.

"Hey, Grete. A while ago, you said that you came from a political family, right?"

"...Yes, what about that?"

"Did you often participate in events like these? I'm a bit jealous, to be honest. It just feels so 'dazzling', you know."

Looking at the remains of the banquet, she thought back to the actual dinner. Zibia had overlooked this situation with a spellbound expression. Just as she said, the current banquet really fit her description as dazzling. Uwe was talking with people responsible for welfare, or any other important parties in the government, giving advice and whatnot, or speaking fondly of the orphanage he had visited before. The people arriving at the banquet wore flashy and gaudy clothes, the women with jewels everywhere on their dresses. Even if it was radical left-wing, it could only be described as dazzling. To Zibia, that must have been an overwhelming scenery. However, Grete shook her head.

"...No, it was a world I could never really fit in." She spoke with full honesty.

Naturally. If she could fit in there—she would not have become a spy. Zibia just gave a 'Huh' as a show of her listening.

"Well, you are bad with men, right."

She didn't press further than needed, and Grete was thankful for that.

"Let us focus on what we have to do for now. We can talk about that later." Grete showed a kind smile, and started cleaning again.

"Understood~" Zibia gave a lax response.

That's right...I have to focus...for the sake of the Boss...

She felt a sharp pain inside her chest for a second, but quickly shook that off. Right as she walked out onto the hallway, Olivia had been waiting for her.

"Grete, do you have a moment?"

Her tone of voice was an octave deeper than usual. She would probably be lectured.

—I have to overcome this at any costs.

"...Just as expected" Grete muttered to herself.

Grete was called to Olivia's private room. Objects were scattered everywhere, piling up on the bed and around. Her private clothes were just hanging down the chair, as the faint scent of cigarettes lingered in the room. Normally, Olivia would not let a girl inside her room like this, which led the girls to the assumption that her room is always dirty, and that didn't seem too far off.

Olivia sat down on the chair, pushing down her clothes with her butt, having Grete stand in front of her.

"During the banquet, why were you just in the kitchen the entire time? I was hoping you could have helped with the guests a bit."

She really was scolded. To that, Grete immediately lowered her head.

"...I apologize. I wasn't feeling well, so I thought I could at least take care of the dishes."

"Hmm...you could have done that after the dinner."

The fact of Grete's bad condition was half lie, half truth. With a great number of men in front of her, her stomach started to hurt. That was not the lie. However, she also hid the fact that she was acting as a spy in the

meantime. That fact she had to cover up at any costs. At the same time, Olivia started playing with the tips of her hair, clearly not intent of hiding her displeasure.

"Listen, you're 18 now, so I think you know this, Grete, but the political world is filled with men, filled with bastards who look down on us. That's why I was hoping that you could at least join me with a smile, because they would have appreciated a cute maid like yours serving them."

"I see..."

Naturally, she was fully aware of that, but she acted like she didn't just in case. Just by doing this, Olivia's mood seemingly approved.

"It might be a bit hard to get used to, but it's not that bad, you know? If you flatter them in any way, they give you a bit of pocket money, and there's those that take you on trips or theatre plays if they like you enough."

"...I believe that is because you are exceedingly beautiful, Olivia-san."

"Eh, you think so? I'm happy—Wait, that's not what this is about."

Olivia let out a grin for a short second, but quickly tightened her expression again.

"Is there any reason why you react that way?"

"....."

Now...how should she cover this up. Since she wasn't skilled in the art of conversation, she had to come up with a proper excuse. A lie too far from reality had no credibility. However, if it was something miniscule, the other person would not believe it. Hence, the only possible excuse she could come up with—

"...I actually have a man I have feelings for, so I would rather not get into contact with another like that."

"Eh, tell me more, c'mon!" Olivia fell off the chair in excitement, and shot up again.

"....."

That worked smoother than Grete anticipated.

"Y-Yes..." Almost a bit too smooth, as Grete was a bit overwhelmed. "...I think you could call it love sickness. Whenever I think of that person, I hesitate to talk to other men..."

"Ah, is it that guy?"

"...That guy?"

"That handsome man from before. Ah, I guess you didn't see him, Grete-chan. Back when that assassin came, there was a handsome guy that I happened to run into."

Following that, she recounted his special traits. Having almost genderless looks on the outside, his expression was as stiff as a rock, wearing a tightly-fitting suit.

"He looked pretty close to Zibia and the rest, but what kind of person is he?"

"...Even if you ask me that..."

"Did he come here to meet you? Tell me, where is that guy right now?"

"...He is nothing but a teacher from our school...he must have been here to watch over us during our part-time jobs."

"Ah I see. Quite the diligent person, I take it. So I jumped to the wrong conclusion, huh."

After firing out question after question, Olivia calmed herself down a bit.

"Sorry to overwhelm you like that. I can't talk about this sort of thing during my work, so it got to me. Still, love, huh? I can't really blame you if you got feelings like that."

Though it wasn't on the level of 'just got to me', Grete nodded along. Olivia let out a sigh, and fixed her position on the chair. From the looks of it, Grete managed to get on her good side. Knowing this, Grete was relieved, but that only lasted for a second.

"Then, can I take him?"

Hearing Olivia's words, Grete tilted her head in confusion.

"Take him?"

"If that teacher isn't the guy you like, then I can take him for myself, right?"

Her expression was like she treated Ron as an object.

"Let me meet him, I'll keep my schedule open."

"But, even if you would be able to meet him, what comes after that is..."

"Ehh, why are you making it sound like I have no chances? I got a good face, and I'm confident in my body."

"....."

"He's probably pent up. I'll let him drink some alcohol, act like I'm drunk and push my breasts on him. If things go well, we'll take things to the bed, and—"

There, Olivia stopped her words. Her smile vanished from her expression, as she grew observative of Grete.

"Phew." Olivia spoke up. "—So you can make a face like that as well, Grete."

"....."

She didn't know what kind of expression she had. Neither did she have the confidence to check in the mirror.

"I was just joking okay? You're so easy to see through, Grete!" Olivia held her stomach as she broke out in laughter, clapping her hands together.

She stood up, leaning onto Grete's shoulders.

"Well, having feelings for your teacher is just fine. But, no relaxing on the job because of that. But, no need to worry, that man will definitely fall for you."

"...I wonder?"

"Yup. After all, you're a beauty, you don't have to panic." Olivia smiled in confidence. "Us beauties have to live easily. Any more pushy and serious, and nobody will come after us."

She probably tried to cheer on Grete. Advice, coming from a grown woman, for a young girl like Grete. She thought of taking it seriously, but—

“...I hate these kinds of thoughts.” Grete gave the exact opposite of that. “I would not fall for someone who neglected the efforts to be loved.”

“The heck is that?”

Olivia looked like she didn’t appreciate all her encouragement going to waste. She took away her hand from Grete’s shoulder, now giving her a slightly irritated gaze.

“—Isn’t that the reason why you’re not being loved?”

“...!” Grete bit her lip.

Countless words were filling her head, but she tried her hardest to keep them under control.

“Ah, bulls-eye, huh.” Olivia laughed. Well, that makes sense. You’re all gloomy after all.”

Those sounded like her true feelings. Olivia waved her hand at Grete.

“Not my problem if you’re going to waste the kind advice of other people. Guess it was the right choice to not come to the banquet, you would have just ruined the atmosphere.”

That was the end of the conversation, Olivia made it sound like that. Her gaze was as cold as ice. But, Grete didn’t bother with that, as she knew that this might be her last time to get inside that room. Hence, she observed every corner of that room. She spotted a handcrafted object on the desk, seemingly treasured much as it was not in the mess of other objects. A jade green jewel shone inside.

“...By the way, that brooch. It’s beautiful.”

Olivia narrowed her eyes.

“It’s a present from my lover. Any problem with that?”

“No, nothing at all...”

Grete gave a polite bow, and left the room.

Handcrafted in the Galgado Empire, isn’t it—Grete held back these final words.

After escaping the questioning of Olivia, Grete collapsed onto her own bed.
I feel...tired...

Every time she would greet the ending of a day, the fatigue caught up onto her. She knew she had to be on guard still, being on a mission, but her body requested a break, and her head didn’t work as well anymore. She had to change into her sleeping attire. Even if her brain was telling her so, she felt her body sink deeper into the mattress, not allowing her to move. The reason for this feeling couldn’t be just because of the fatigue.

Rather, Olivia’s words stabbed fully into Grete’s soft spots.

‘—Isn’t that the reason why you’re not being loved?’

She was aware of that.



She didn't have a charming outer appearance like Lily, able to pull in the people around her. Neither did she have any strong, confident personality like Zibia. Nor did she give off a desire to protect like Sara did.

Grete was just a gloomy, introverted girl, unable to properly express herself. She gave Ron no reason to develop any romantic feelings for her. Grete was painfully aware of that.

That is why I have to devote myself like this...

Show effort, and bring about results, answering his expectations, she would be loved. That is her only method. In a daze, Grete reached out to the small desk next to the bed.

—A fountain pen.

Tightly gripping it, she embraced the pen.

I still have not had the time to return it...

Ultimately, she kept holding onto it like a charm. Touching it like this, she remembered Ron, and felt a bit better. It was the opposition to the brooch Olivia had received. That she also had something from her beloved one, even if it was stolen. Naturally, the winner was as clear as day still.

"...Boss." Grete muttered in a longing way, but no response came.

Dwelling in emotions and thoughts for a brief moment, Grete heard a knock on the door, followed by Lily poking her head inside.

"Ah, good work today~"

"Lily-san...?"

Lifting her upper body, Grete faced the visitor. She remembered that she hadn't exchanged reports with her yet, a complete failure.

"That's right, about the banquet today—"

"Let's leave aside any work talk for now." Lily fully ignored Grete's words.

"There there~"

Lily jumped upon the bed, gently patting Grete on the head. Flashing an innocent, gleeful smile, Lily looked like she was consulting a child.

Grete blinked in confusion.

"...What happened?"

"I thought you must be tired, so I thought of spoiling you a bit."

"Haaa..."

"Sorry that it's my hand, and not Sensei's."

What had gotten into Lily? Grete didn't know, as she let Lily continue.

"If healing Sensei's fatigue is your job, then it's my job to heal you, Grete-chan. Don't torment yourself too much."

From the looks of it, Lily was trying to cheer up Grete, trying to soothe her exhaustion. Lily turned towards Grete's back, starting to massage her entire body. Head, neck, shoulders, with skilled movements, she removed the stiff parts in Grete's body. According to Lily, she would often give her ally Monika a massage like this. Though it was probably because of an order coming from Monika.

At the same time, there was something that Grete couldn't help but notice—The awfully soft sensation hitting the back of her head.

“...You really have a great style, Lily-san...”

“Where did that come from?”

The girl’s chest had been hitting her this entire time. Panicking a bit, Lily jumped away from Grete. For some reason, if one brought up her well-endowed chest and overall great style, she grew awfully embarrassed. Was there really any need to be this embarrassed about it? Grete sighed.

“...Well, I had been trying to seduce the Boss several times but after failing consecutively, I started to feel nervous.”

“No no no, there’s no need to be down about it. I mean, your style is also—” Lily’s words came to a stop.

More correctly, they came to a stop as her gaze ran over Grete’s modest chest.

“W-Well...”

“Well?”

“.....You can do some good male disguises.”

“.....”

Those were the long-awaited words. Lily had guessed it herself, but she stepped on a landmine with that, so she tried to defuse it quickly.

“T-That’s the disguise specialist I know and love! You have the perfect body for it!”

“.....”

“A genius, without having to use any tricks about your chest!”

“.....”

“One would even think you’re disguised as a man right now!” Lily waved her hands, but only dug her own grave even further.

“Could I break your little finger now...?”

“Ah, she’s seriously pissed?” Lily raised a shriek.

But, the one having received the most damage was Grete. Separating her back from Lily, she fell forwards, and slammed her hands into the blanket, cursing ‘This world is riddled with pain’ inside her head. Having her complex pointed out, she felt like crying. On top of that, she remembered the words she had tried to seduce Ron with.

‘Fall asleep in my chest’, I said...with nothing to offer...

Looking from an outsider’s perspective, it was awfully arrogant with no basis to move on. If she had been told ‘Where is that supposed chest?’, she would have bit her tongue right then and there, throwing away her life.

Right as Grete’s heart was in a mess, Lily tapped on her back.

Don’t worry. You have your own charm, Grete-chan.” Lily gave kind words.

“That’s why, we’ll stay as comrades no matter what happens.”

Giving more damage than healing, Lily ran away. Being left alone in the room, Grete sighed. She was thankful to Lily, at least to a certain level, but she couldn’t absolutely accept her words.

...I cannot believe that I have any charm to myself...

Burying her face in the sheets, she continued to dwell on her shortcomings. Now that she arrived in this state, past wounds started to show.

—‘I cannot love a daughter like you!’

She could not move away from that curse. The words came gushing back countless times until now. She pressed on her head, trying to rid herself from these thoughts.

—‘Why can you not even show a simple smile!’

She wrapped herself up in the blanket.

—‘Why was a creepy and unsightly daughter like you even born!’

But, even if her body disappeared, this torture did not.

Ron was reading through reports at a certain hotel. They were documents from a certain spy educational facility. Exam results and grades of Grete. Her written examination was almost close to perfect. But, as soon as the practical exams arrived, her grades dropped drastically. Yet, if they didn’t involve any contact with other people, she would always succeed at ease. The problems were with infiltration and negotiation—exams that involved contact. There, she received grades that barely resulted in her ending up as a drop-out.

—I am bad at dealing with men.

He didn’t doubt her back then by any means, but this data here gave the final proof.

Androphobia...the fear of men, huh.

The girl’s father was a politician. A high-ranking member of the National Diet. Representing the left-of-center faction, he had soft cooperation with the radical left-wing Uwe. According to official documents, he had three sons, as well as his youngest child, a daughter. For medical treatment of a sickness, she started living overseas at the age of 13.

The reason she started attending the educational facility was the strong recommendation of her father. Or in other words, she became a nuisance to him.

The political world is dominated by men after all. What is sought in women is beauty and a good nature...A woman that cannot converse with men is of no use...It must have been hell...

No mistaking it, her circumstances couldn’t have been worse. Not to mention, she apparently gave the name of [Manamusume] to herself. What horrible irony. Ron teared up the reports, putting it inside the ashtray.

“—But, I won’t be able to understand her heart with just this bundle of paper.”

Lighting the pieces of paper on fire, he burned them.

“For now, it’s time to get this mission done.” Ron spoke, tying up his hair behind the back of his head. “Let’s start, shall we—It’s time to hunt the hunter.”

Sara was giving out some animal food in her small hut. Being a few minutes away from the residence and the nearby town, she had found this empty hut. A falcon, a pigeon, a dog, a rat, almost like a small animal shelter of

sorts. Transport, diversion, investigation, animals had the most diverse uses. Back at the time where science was only starting to develop, animals had uses that couldn't be neglected.

—Training animals. When Sara was forced to explain it, she had given it that name, for pure convenience. But rather, she called it building up a relationship of trust between the animals and her. Especially her friend Bernard had been with her before she even started attending the educational facility.

"There, you've always loved pig meat, right."

He was quite the gourmet. If it wasn't special animal food made by Sara, he would not even bother to eat it. Watching the sight of Bernard chomping on the food, a knock came from the door of the hut.

"Eek!" Sara twitched in surprise.

An enemy arrived? If something were to happen, she had Bernard protect her. Relying on a gun just to make sure, she faced the door, when she heard a familiar voice.

"It's me."

"Ah, Sensei."

Opening the door, she was greeted by Ron. Sara didn't really know what he did normally, or where he was hiding. But, looking at the documents inside his bag, he did some good intelligence work. Sara moved the table found in the room into the middle, scanning the documents Ron brought with him. On the other side, Ron was observing the documents Zibia had stolen. Killed by the assassin was an old acquaintance of Uwe's. Hence, it would make sense that the assassin themselves, or a supporter of such, lured around in his near vicinity.

"Seems like all the information's present, aye. Might be close to getting up a candidate already."

"Yeah." Ron gave a short response, taking out more documents.

Details of the politicians believed to have been killed by Shikabane.

"Death by fall is the most prominent method. Since no dangerous weapons are being used, it's hard to track any remains or clues. Any suicide not in broad daylight looks like it's their work."

"What bad taste..."

"The one who passed away was a politician who tried to reconstruct the country after the war. That must have been tough..." Ron's expression showed a slight glimmer of gloominess.

Focussing on the incidents in front of oneself, you can easily lose the bigger picture. It isn't just murder. Humans disappear, the government moves, the country changes, and the world is being rebuilt. Removing politicians on the bad side of the Empire, they try to set up beneficial politicians instead. With this, the costs for war are avoided, and you can control your neighbouring country much easier.

So this...is the War waged in Shadows...

Sara subconsciously swallowed her breath. The assassin called Shikabane, they alone had contributed to the newly-built graves of more than several tens of people in various countries. It wasn't just targets either, sometimes the people around the targets were killed, allowing them to get closer to the target itself. When chased, they would wrap up normal citizens into it, killing them, which would allow them to escape. The worst kind of strategy, with no glimmer of ethical thinking.

—An enemy they had to fight from now on.

Together with anger, there was a chilled sensation inside Sara's body, starting to rise up.

"Sara." Ron called out to her. "No need to worry. The world's strongest spy will take care of the job, so leave it to me."

Just with these words, Sara found herself calming down a bit. His confidence, and the mere fact that Ron deserved this title, saved the coward Sara. Ron decided that his work was done, and made his way out the room.

"I-I...!"

His back to Sara, Ron stopped after hearing the girl. She had she needed to tell him at all costs.

"I know I'm pathetic, but that gave me relief. I'm happy if I'm being relied upon, but speaking in true words, having Sensei with us is much more calming..."

"No need to be embarrassed."

"T-That's also why I want you to be a bit more concerned about Grete-senpai."

Ron turned around, his expression filled with slight confusion. Since she was this much of a coward, she understood how much it took from Grete.

"I'm sure that Grete-senpai's actions need much more courage than you could imagine, Sensei."

"....."

Ron didn't speak a word. His expression was colder than usual, not allowing Sara to read anything from it. However, a short 'I see' eventually leaked from his mouth, as he left Sara's room.

Five days after the first attack—the second one occurred.

Zibia jumped up from the bed at the sound of gunshots. Dashing over towards Uwe's room, the glass of the window had shattered. Luckily, Uwe was still alive. With his rifle in hand, he took deep breaths. He had it pointed at the pitch-black darkness outside the window, so Zibia slowly pushed it down.

"A second attempt..."

Though, it had failed. Sniping at Uwe from outside the window, or even using the broken glass as a deadly wound. Still, through the change of layout with the furniture, the bed was safe.

—Weird. A skilled assassin would fail two times in such a short time?

The bullet had fallen to the floor. With the intent to check it, Zibia picked it up with a handkerchief. From the looks of it, it was a small handgun, a .25 caliber. The closest tree from the window was around 30 meters away, meaning that the chance of hitting Uwe was too slim. There was no intention of killing him?

Being suspicious about the situation, Zibia stuffed the bullet into her pocket. There, the other residents came dashing into the room. Even the secretary, who didn't have much presence most of the time, checked on Uwe.

"I'm fine." Uwe let out a sigh. "White-hair, it's all thanks to you. Because you moved the bed without my permission, I was saved from being stabbed to death by the shattered glass."

"Well, coincidences do exist~" Zibia returned a grin.

Naturally, that was all planned. Thinking about the layout of the room with the trees standing outside the residence, she changed the layout of the room to avoid any possible assassination from being sniped.

"That devilish man with the mark again." Uwe snorted. "Shit! Next time I'll definitely shoot him off the tree!"

"What about your night blindness?"

"Thanks to your cooking, it's gotten a lot better. Next time that guy's wasting my time, I'll put a bullet in his head."

By fixing Uwe's diet for the past two weeks, his symptoms had gotten much better. Though that was a good thing, it could put Uwe into danger as well. Zibia took away the rifle from Uwe, leaning it against the wall.

"Having guts is a good thing, but Uwe-san, how about hiring some security guards?"

"Hm, that is not a bad idea, but..." Uwe crossed his arms, as he started thinking.

Apparently, he was balancing his own desire to save money against his own safety. But, taking it into consideration, it wasn't a bad idea, seeing that it would make the girl's work easier as well.

"—You can't do that."

However, there was a voice speaking against this—Olivia. In the midst of this tumult, she had appeared behind them.

"Uwe-san. We don't know where this assassin might be hiding, so heightening the number of outsiders is too scary in my eyes." She tried to convince Uwe against this idea.

Continuing her words, she snuggled up to Uwe.

"Additionally, shouldn't you be discharging the recent outsiders you have hired?"

Understanding that Olivia was on about, Zibia subconsciously took a step forward.

"What are you talking about? Even with this attack, I was—"

"You aren't scared at all, are you? I wonder why?" Olivia said with a shaking voice. "You were acting awfully brave during the first attack, are you used to this sort of trouble? Tell me? Was it really just a coincidence that you moved the bed?"

"....."

"Uwe-san, let us look into them one more time, okay? Checking their belongings, and such..." Olivia clung to Uwe's arm, at a distance close enough she would be able to kiss him, she gazed at her employer. Uwe on his end looked awfully confused. He was torn between trust and doubt about his maids. Zibia couldn't come up with an answer. She herself knew that her background was suspicious, so she couldn't say anything back. To that, Olivia smiled victoriously.

"That's—"

"Olivia-san, by the way..."

Right as Zibia wanted to answer, a saving grace arrived.

"...Holding the glass with your bare hands is dangerous."

Grete. She had appeared in the room without anybody catching on. Whilst clearing up the glass, she directed her gaze at Olivia, who returned the gaze in silence. Her expression turned cold, clearly not appreciating Grete's appearance. But, a smile immediately returned on her face.

"...You're right. Seems like I cut my finger. I'll go wash it right now."

With these words, Olivia opened her hand, and a small piece of glass fell out, around three centimeters big. With a bothered expression, she separated from Uwe, about to return to her private room. The second she passed Grete, they glared at each other.

"....."

"....."

What did their glares imply? Zibia and the others had no idea. For now, they had to take care of cleaning up the room, and Zibia used that time to call out to Grete in a quiet voice.

"Hey, when did Olivia-san grab that piece of broken glass?"

Almost like a hidden weapon. With skilled use, you could easily cut the carotid artery by using that small piece. Not to mention with a situation like that, it wouldn't be suspicious at all either.

—Undoubtedly, a skill befitting of a spy.

"She snuck up on us. If she had felt like it, I—"

"Zibia-san." Grete muttered in a calm voice. "Let us focus on our maid work for now."

It seemed like she had already realized. Zibia had to keep her act, but still needed to know one thing.

"What is Sensei saying about all of this?"

"...He left it to me."

Zibia's eyes opened wide.

"You're taking that much responsibility?"

Grete nodded, continuing with the cleaning. Zibia didn't expect that. She knew that Grete had quite the heavy burden, but this was crossing her expectations.

"....."

She took a close look at Grete's profile, solidified.

Now that we talked about it, what is that bastard even doing right now?

Zibia glared into the dark night.

Eventually, the cleaning took until the deep night. Grete held her head from the pain assaulting her, returning to her room. Most likely because she had worked night after night. If she wasn't careful, she would space out immediately. But, relaxing now was not an option. She had a mountain full of things to worry about.

*Most likely, **she** will not move just yet. If she did, that would only raise suspicion on her end... Though she might be angered, that shouldn't be enough to get the Boss to move...*

Grete had Sara check out the passport of Olivia. She came from a small country to the east. Taking regular breaks from work under Uwe, she often went overseas for trips. Coincidentally, the locations she went to often overlapped with the ones of Shikabane's murders. Every time, somebody involved in the government had been killed. She most likely used the information she could gather whilst working here.

I still cannot measure her true skill... With the incoming attacks, I am starting to figure it out bit by bit, but acting any more than this...

The final act was approaching. Every single action from now on would decide over success or failure—If she made any mistake, her allies would die.

"....."

Becoming aware of this fact, Grete felt her heart tighten up. This was the responsibility Ron had to bear. She could understand the thought process of 'I'll take care of it all myself'. Even at the previous Impassable Mission, he had no difficulty at all to clear it. Because he was scared to rely on his comrades, scared to lose them in the process.

She couldn't fall asleep properly. Rather than sleeping, she might as well work on her plan only a second faster. The dinner didn't go down her throat. What would she do if an incident happened while she was thoroughly enjoying the taste? Her legs felt heavy. If she relaxed only a second, it seemed as if her knees would give in. And then, she might not be able to get up again.

Her legs got caught in the carpet. Right as she was about to fall over, someone caught her.

"Grete-chan."

It was Lily. She had grabbed Grete's shoulders, gazing at her in anxiety. Right in front of Grete's own room, most likely to give a report.

"Are you okay? Come take a rest in my room."

“...Apologies, I was getting careless.” Grete separated her body from Lily. “I can rest in my own bed...”

“No can do. I’ll give you another massage. So much that you don’t want to move an inch anymore.”

Not listening to any complaints, Lily took Grete to her room. In terms of strength, Lily had the upper hand. Grete knew she couldn’t be accepting this favor, but she was unable to fight back. Not to mention that Lily’s massages were actually quite skilled. Taking out the part where she made fun of Grete’s complex, it did make her feel better.

However, that one moment of relaxation turned out fatal.

“—Got you.”

“.....Eh?”

She heard something suspicious whisper in her ear. The second she let down her guard, it was too late.

“Secuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuured!” Lily gave the sign.

Grete’s mouth was covered by Zibia standing in front of her. She apparently had hidden beside the door. Grete’s arms were restricted, not allowing her to escape. With a softly, yet threatening ‘Don’t fight back’, Grete was thrown onto the bed, Sara being present next to the bed as well. She jumped on Grete’s legs. At the same time, Zibia restrained her right arm, Lily taking care of the left. Her entire body was now restricted, not allowing her to move.

“...U-Um, what exactly is this about...?”

“You are to mercilessly interrogate the enemy.” Lily announced with a heavy tone, taking out a huge painting brush.

She ran that smooth, bushy hair along Grete’s neck.

“~~~!” Grete writhed in agony, but found no means of escaping.

“The enemy will receive no sympathy.”

“W-What about that ‘We will always be allies’ from yesterday...?”

“That was a lie.”

Lily said so with no hesitation. That was the type of lie you should never make. As Grete looked up at Lily with a reproachful expression, Lily approached her skirt with her hand.

“Hop!” Lily gave a childish sound, pulling out something from Grete’s skirt. It looked like a button, some sort of machinery.

“A wiretap...?”

“Fufu, don’t think that you could deceive me forever~”

They were the same ones they had previously set up in the entire residence. Most likely, Lily had put it there whilst acting to give Grete a message. That would mean that she had caught on to Grete’s actions a while back already. Lily showed a confident grin.

“That man with the mark—was just you in disguise right, Grete-chan?”

Hearing her words, both Zibia and Sara went ‘Huh?’ in shock, their eyes opening wide. And so reacted Grete as well. She figured that they would be able to find out eventually, but not that Lily would be the first. She was

thinking of keeping it secret, but the painting brush once again ran down her neck, forcing Grete to twitch furiously. This was torture, no doubt. Hence, Grete sighed.

“...I give up...It’s true, I was the criminaaaaaaaaaa—!”

Right as she wanted to reveal it, she was tickled yet again.

“Heh, this is actually pretty fun!” Lily muttered as she looked at the prush.

“Anyway, why would you do that?”

“...I was about to explain that, but you interrupted me.”

“Your reaction was so cute, I couldn’t help it~” Lily made it sound like she had no ill-intentions.

Luckily, she wasn’t feeling hurt for being deceived.

“Impersonating the assassin, I tested the reactions of the maids and other security personnel...Sniffing out anybody acting suspicious...”

Indeed, the one who had fired at Uwe and Olivia was Grete the entire time. Making the gun shots resound, a skilled spy would definitely put themselves on-guard. Acting scared and powerless, they would still try to hide themselves in the shadows.

Lily smiled like she had seen through everything.

“How about you give us the rest of the details as well? About the full story of this mission.”

“...No, this is my responsibility alone.”

“You really are amazing, Grete-chan. In the end, we couldn’t say ‘I want to split the burden the Boss has to carry’ after all.”

Lily tightly grasped Grete’s hand.

“But, now I can say it...I want to split the burden that you have to carry, Grete-chan.”

Watching Lily’s kind gaze, Grete arrived at a possible reason as to how the girl had seen through her disguise. Lily, the leader, had probably paid attention to Grete’s fatigue. Or maybe it was the opposite. Because she always cared about her allies albeit her nonchalant outer appearance, is why she was appointed to be the leader.

“That’s right.”

“Yup!”

Zibia and Sara both followed up on Lily’s words. They both kindly smiled at the girl, making Grete blush. To think that she had allies like them, caring about her, even if it wasn’t the man she loved. Overwhelmed, her mouth moved naturally.

“Everyone, here me out. Our target Shikabane is—”

Before she could finish her sentence, certain words arrived at Grete’s ears.

“I knew it, you all were spies.”

A voice void of emotion. There had been no presence before this. That must have been her skill—The skill of an assassin. Fear filled Grete’s heart.

“Whatever, I’ll just do it flashy this time.”

The voice came from the exact opposite, from the door to the room. Slightly peeking inside—Olivia. She followed up, throwing something inside the room.

—A hand grenade.

“To the window!” Grete screamed.

The first one to move was Zibia. Grabbing Sara by the neck, and kicking Lily’s butt, she brought her allies to the only possible escape. Having been freed, Grete followed after them. Zibia broke the window with a skilled kick, as they safely managed escape to the outside. The second they pushed their bodies against the wall, the grenade exploded, roaring flames blowing past them from the window, together with the glass and pieces of the furniture. The sheets flying past acted as a shield as well. They avoided any casualties. “Alright, one more.”

However, that wasn’t the end of the onslaught. From above their heads, another grenade came soaring down. She had perfectly anticipated the way of escape the girls would take. Though Grete tried her best to come up with a method of avoiding the blast, it was too late. Right before the grenade exploded, a shadow flew past above their heads.

A falcon. The falcon with the name Bernard came soaring to catch the grenade mid-air. Carrying it high above into the sky, he let it go far enough away from his owner Sara—but it was too late. Right next to the falcon, the grenade exploded.

“—!” Sara let out a voice indescribable by words.

The blood splattered right into Grete’s face, scattered feathers slowly descending. With a completely changed appearance, the falcon crashed into the ground, a dull sound resounding.

“Mr Bernard...?” Sara’s voice filled the silence after.

No more attacks came from Olivia. She had retreated already. Grete didn’t expect her to act this early.

“Where—” Lily raised her voice. “Where is Sensei? We have to call him right away!”

Everybody agreed, even without saying it. If they had his strength, A sacrifice like this shouldn’t have been necessary.

“...Not here...”

But, the situation was more cruel than they anticipated.

“Eh...?”

“...The Boss will not come here...”

She had to tell them. The truth of this situation. The decision she had given because of heartbroken thoughts—

“...We can only win this battle with the four of us...”

Zibia, Lily, and Sara shortly after all froze up. She hadn’t anticipated that she had to give this cold truth at such a devastating moment.

—The world’s strongest spy...

...was not by their side.

Chapter 4: Romantic Affection and Assassination

Olivia ran. Plagued with impatience and anger, she continued moving her legs. To think this lass would see through her identity. Though it pained her to have lost an advantageous position right next to an influential politician, it was probably the right time to cut off the ties. She had to get away from the mansion as quickly as possible. These three girls should have been caught up in the blast. However, there was another enemy still alive.

[Kagaribi]....

A long-haired, beautiful man she had run into once. He was the spy she had to be most wary about in the Republic of Deen. Most likely, this man was the one who saw through her disguise. Grete acted as the assassin, whereas [Kagaribi] checked the reactions of the people present, most likely.

Olivia came from a small country to the east. She didn't even remember her real name anymore. She had lived as a prostitute in a rural area, prepared to end her days like this. Though she had quite the popularity, she didn't have the means to change her way of living, most likely marrying a customer in the future, ending up in a grave, forgotten by everybody. That was the fate awaiting her.

Sealing off her heart and soul, she continued to sell her own body. The turning point came as a wealthy politician arrived in this rural area to play around with some women. That day, all 23 guests and hostesses—were shot. By pure coincidence, Olivia had been in the back, sound asleep, too late to pick up on that. Before she woke up by the sound of footsteps, it was already too late. The tragedy arrived. Next to the countless dead bodies, a single man stood tall. The skin on his cheeks was split as it fell, the man looking like a corpse.

'So you're awake. I did use a silencer but I have to praise you for that nonchalant personality.'

The man showed an unexpectedly cheerful laugh.

'Now, you jump out of that window.'

'Eh...?'

'You had a sudden psychological breakdown, killing everybody here with a gun the guest brought with him. Following that, you killed yourself by jumping out of the window. Nobody will know of my assassination.'

He continued to explain. She was shown a grotesque scenery, and yet her head was calm and collected.

‘Assassination...? Was there a reason to kill everybody here...?’

‘No, my aim was but one man. The rest just happened in the momentum.’

The man showed his white teeth. ‘If only the politician was killed, they would suspect the work of a spy. But, if unrelated other people died as well, it would be regarded as an accident, mindless manslaughter.’

To conceal the truth. To hide the reality of what happened, the man had killed countless innocent people, at high efficiency. Holding his gun, he slowly approached Olivia. Though she tried to escape, she immediately reached the wall, the window right above her. This was the fourth floor. If she were to throw herself out, the chances of her surviving were slim.

‘Hurry and jump out. If you’re lucky, you might be able to survive.’ He spoke with a deep, intimidating voice. ‘If you refuse, I will just have to shoot you, and have someone else do it.’

Looking at her surroundings, a few people were still breathing. Like her Senpai she had been in great care of, friends, the store owner who picked her up, a consecutive customer, and eventually, the assassin right in front of her. His eyes were cold as ice, showing no humanity. Met with this situation—Olivia felt her body grow hot. His gaze was different than any other before. They didn’t show boredom and listlessness.

—Like a prince from a different dimension.

The heat born inside her head passed through her body and muscles, escaping through her lower body. Her heartbeat accelerated, as her cold skin started to warm up.

‘Hey, make me your disciple.’

Her mouth moved. Without thinking, she reached out for the hand of the man he held the gun with. Thinking back to it, it was most likely just a whim. He let Olivia hold the gun. Accepting it, she kept firing and firing. Her Senpai, the store manager, the regular, her friends. She finished them off. It felt refreshing. Though it was her first time using a gun, she fired accurately. Maybe she had a talent for it. This was her first time she was this thrilled, like her life had changed for the better in a matter of seconds. Finishing off the last person, Olivia turned towards the assassin with a smile.

‘Take me out of here.’

The man showed a gaze like he was looking at a suspicious animal, but finally showed a grin himself. From that day onward, Olivia became a spy of the empire, through encountering the assassin of the Galgado Empire, [Tansui]—Roland.

Thus, the intimate relationship between Olivia and Roland started.

Deceiving, learning assassintation skills, travelling to many renowned places in the world, receiving large amounts of recompenses. Supporting the assassinations of the teacher called Roland, she would take the gun in her hands if necessary, as countless people died by their deeds. Everytime a

mission succeeded, Roland embraced Olivia in bed. From the Republic of Deen, he was named [Shikabane], and feared as a strong, skilled assassin. Knowing that she was right in that person's arms, Olivia's heart was filled with indescribable warmth.

Days filled with slaughter, a great sum of riches, and loved by the greatest assassin to exist. All of these things, she would have never been able to gain at the rural place she worked before.

'Be careful of a certain man.'

Finally, around the time Olivia had taken the lessons of her teacher as her own, Roland gave her a warning. Olivia would work at a residence of a man called Uwe Appell, slowly but steadily gaining his trust, and leak any sort of information she could get her hands on over to the Empire. Then, he spoke about the strongest guy the Republic of Deen had at its disposal.

'I told you that our spies had finished off [Homura], right? But, apparently, one person made it out alive. Using a biological weapon as bait, they planned an assassination, but that failed as well. As of right now, he is the man you have to be most careful of in the Republic of Deen.' The man spoke with his skinny face. '[Kagaribi], [Chiri no Ou³], Axe, Ron, [Reitetsu⁴], [Kanateko⁵]'—He has countless times, but most of the time, he goes by Ron. Luckily, I have a picture of him.'

Roland showed Olivia a single picture, probably taken in secret. A young boy smiled at the camera. Like it was taken during a friendly chat with family or friends. Like he had been close with the person it was taken with—'Hey, a question.' Olivia spoke up as she burned the image inside her head. 'What?'

'Didn't his teacher betray him? Why will nobody kill him? We even got a picture of him.'

'We even know where he's currently living.'

'Then—'

'But, every spy who tried their luck at finishing him was caught—Most likely, by this very man.'

So he used the place he lived at as a trap. Using the fact that this information was leaked, he lessened the numbers of spies of the Empire. Roland nodded.

'If you were to encounter this man, immediately contact me.'

'That's right, you should have no problem with the spy of a small country like—'

'No, he's on par with me.'

She couldn't believe it. She knew of Roland's overwhelming skill. As far as she was concerned, he was regarded as the owner of the greatest set of skills in the assassination business. Only able to rival him could possibly [Hebi]—No, she didn't know the details, but there's no doubting that Roland would come out victorious.

'I can feel it, it's destiny...He finally appeared. Oh how long have I waited.' Roland spoke with a relieved expression. 'He is my rival. There had never been someone as strong as him, and it bored me to death.'

'Rival...? Someone as strong as you?'

'I feel like...we'll be in it for the long run.'

Was it an intuition of his, being a first-rate spy? It really felt like destiny. He represented the word [Kagaribi]. At the same time, Roland stood as his counterpart, with the codename [Tansui]. Fire and Water, something that would not mix together.

Roland reached out for the girl with his arms. She didn't resist, just embracing him as well.

'That's why, be careful of that man. My beloved one.'

With these words, he handed her a single brooch.

That is why Olivia started to run. Now that her real identity had been revealed, she had no reason to stay at that residence. Instead, she ran towards the trees surrounding it. Luckily, the moon shone tonight. For now, she had to run through the thicket, escaping from the mountain. She could not fight him at any costs. Because he possessed similar skill to Roland—
"...I cannot fight him at any costs. Because he possesses similar similar skill to Shikabane—"

"....."

"—That is probably what Olivia-san is thinking at this very moment." Grete spoke with a calm voice.

Gathered around her were Zibia and Lily, listening to her explanation. The scent of gunpowder still lingered in the air. Over at the garden, Uwe was raising his voice in confusion, but they didn't have time to explain. Since they would be forced to deliver an explanation, Zibia and the others instead hid inside the building.

"—So that's what this is about."

Listening to the girl's explanation, Zibia gave a nod. She felt that every single piece came together.

"You sure are amazing..."

"...Thank you very much." Grete softly lowered her head.

"Eh, what?" The only one unable to follow the conversation was Lily. "What do you mean Sensei isn't here? We've seen Sensei countless times, and Sara-chan also—"

"It was all Grete in disguise." Zibia revealed the truth.

Their comrade didn't only act as the maid and assassin, but also as yet another person.

"All these times we saw Sensei around the vicinity, it was actually Grete."

"Ohhh..." Lily's eyes opened wide.

So even Lily, who had seen through one of Grete's disguises once, couldn't figure it out a second time. Yet, who could blame her. Look at the first attack. First, she acted as the assassin, putting up traps for Zibia and Lily,

then changed into the disguise of Ron, and saved them. It was impossible for anybody else.

"I really had no idea. Even though I saw you up close."

Grete put one hand on her chest.

"...I have every little detail about the Boss in my head. His breathing, his blinking, even a single strand of his hair."

"You really are amazing!"

"...I excel at male disguises after all."

"Ah, are you still mad about that?" Lily retorted after seeing Grete's cold gaze toward her.

"...Anyway, the Boss should be far away from this place." Grete once again summed up her words.

Zibia arrived at the reason for his absence.

"To assassinate the assassin, right?" Zibia directed her gaze upwards. "The one hiding in this residence wasn't Shikabane. It was a cooperator of Shikabane—Olivia."

It was clear as day that Olivia had to be someone different from Shikabane. Her outer appearance was far off from what was stated in the records. Rather, she had to have been an ally of his. Then, Ron's actions would make sense as well.

"Leaving Olivia to us, he would go and fight the real Shikabane. Right?"

Grete nodded. To that, Lily's eyes opened wide.

"Eh? Then, Sensei is going to fight Shikabane all by himself? Choosing four people to help him on a mission was just a lie, not relying on his allies again —"

"That wasn't a lie. He did choose four people." Zibia shook her head.

No doubting it, he had chosen the four most skilled girls.

"He took them with him to kill Shikabane—The four girls besides us."

The remaining for girls of [Tomoshibi] that weren't present here—Tia, Monika, Annette, Elna. The four girls who remained at the Kagerou Palace were the four girls who were chosen in reality. Lily must have caught on to what Zibia was trying to say, as her expression froze up.

"In other words, we were the ones left out." She said, her tone slightly saddened.

The main part of the mission happened over at their side. At this moment, they must have been in the middle of their battle with Shikabane. If asked why he took these inexperienced girls with him, the answer was simple—He didn't.

"—Marvelous."

Right as they arrived at this conclusion, they heard a deep, resounding voice. Turning their heads towards this voice, it was Grete who imitated Ron.

"—It's me. I asked Grete to relay this message. I'm sorry that you had to end up as the ones deceived. Having the assassin residing in the mansion

think that I am close by was the best method to keep you all safe. It should also keep the enemy in check."

It was almost like a recorded message. His tone, volume, it came from Grete's mouth.

"—I do feel bad for not taking you with me on this mission. That's why, let me at least state my reasons."

Zibia and Lily both swallowed their breaths, listening in anticipation. They wouldn't be satisfied without hearing this.

"—To start with Zibia, she is still suffering from an injury on her right arm. I was too worried to take her with me to this battle with Shikabane. I want her to participate when she's back to full strength. It really is regrettable."

"....."

"Sara is extraordinary when it comes to controlling animals. But, I am still worried about her mental state. I know that her genius will eventually awaken, but for now, it is too early."

"..."

"Needless to say, Lily makes a lot of mistakes. Her true skill is still growing. Though she is a vital point to the team, with that mental strength she possesses, I judged that this would not work against Shikabane."

".....!"

Ron' evaluation hit every mark. They couldn't say anything back at that. Zibia could only grit her teeth. She didn't have any overwhelming intellect that made her stand out. Most likely, she didn't reveal the fact about her injury because she feared she didn't have anything worthwhile.

Next to her was Lily, her lips shut tightly, as she had a rare serious expression on her face. She as well should be frustrated about this fact.

—The fact that they were not chosen by Ron.

The truth stabbed them right into their chests.

"—That being said, it's not all bad."

Grete's voice resounded once again, to which the two reflexively raised their heads. Making it sound like the most important part was about to come, Ron continued his words, coming from Grete.

"—The skill and talent to work with your allies is exceptionally high. You show your skill immediately even when working with others. Your enemy would most likely be the disciple of Shikabane. She is strong. You four are the only ones I could send off, confidently knowing that you could stand your ground." Grete shortly paused Ron' message, looking at the other girls.

"—Without relying on my strength, defeat the disciple of the assassin. If it's you, I know you can do it."

Following these words, Grete returned to her own voice with a '...That was all'. A sigh left Zibia's mouth. No, it wasn't a sigh, it was more of a snicker. During the entire explanation, he didn't use say that he judged like this out of a whim, or a gut feeling. He tried his hardest to find adequate words for his decision.

Yeah...that's just the type of guy he is.

Observing lack of experience and worsened condition, he judged accordingly.

And that's why I decided to stay in your team...!

Warmth started to expand inside her body. She let out a short laugh, and licked her lips.

"Ain't that the perfect chance? Weren't we going to stop relying on him too much? Even without him here, we should be able to defeat one enemy at least."

"Right. I'll make him regret that he didn't take the genius Lily-chan with him!" Lily showed enthusiasm.

Grete watched this, and raised one eyebrow.

"...I thought you would be dejected at this."

Lily and Zibia met eyes, their voices overlapping.

"Nah, we're fired up now."

They weren't chosen as the members he would be fighting Shikabane with. But, in other words, his trust into them was far greater. They finished confirming the situation. All that was left, was to act.

—They could not allow Olivia to escape.

"Lily and I will chase after her. Grete, we'll leave the operation to you."

Zibia moved her gaze. "...And Sara, you keep going with the medical treatment."

Zibia gave orders to the girl sitting a further back from them.

"....." Sara gave no response.

She was fully focussed on treating her injured pet. Though it wasn't right next to him, the falcon Bernard had still suffered from the explosion. His wings were bent in the wrong direction, and the shards of the grande had slashed his stomach. She really couldn't see any way for him to survive this.

—I guess not talking to her right now would be the best idea.

Right as she decided on that, Sara stood up, rushed over to Zibia, and handed her something.

"U-Um! This is Jonny-shi! He can follow her scent!"

It was a small puppy, with beautiful black fur. With tears in her eyes, Sara forced out a husky voice.

"J-Just as Sensei said, I can't be as courageous as you Senpais, and I'm pathetic enough that I can't even leave Bernard-shi's side right now, but this is the only thing I can do—"

"More than enough. If it wasn't for you, we would have died, you know?"

Zibia gently rubbed the girl's head, promising that they would avenge her beloved pet.

Beneath her hand, Sara wiped away her tears, and rushed back to the side of the falcon.

"One last thing. Grete, were you on bad terms with Olivia?"

"Ah, I was wondering about that as well." Lily joined after Zibia's question.

Grete shrugged her shoulders.

"...She came asking me if she could take the Boss."

Zibia and Lily laughed at the same time.

"Guess we really can't lose this."

"She doesn't know where she stands at all."

Most likely, Olivia only meant these words as a joke. However, because of that very joke, she had angered Grete. Ron's trust, Sara and Bernard, as well as Grete's love for Ron, these facts motivated the girls even more than anything else.

Zibia and Lily both took off their maid uniforms. At the same time, they clad their bodies in the mission attire they had prepared with them. There was no need to hide their identities anymore.

"Should we show him? That we're plenty strong even without Sensei:"

"We'll have her pay for hurting our ally."

The two spies flashed invincible smiles, as they started dashing towards the forest.

Olivia stood inside the forest, taking a deep sigh. She must have run around ten kilometers away from Uwe's residence. Even if [Kagaribi] were to find the corpses of the girls, he shouldn't be able to trace her this far. She stood still, and checked her own equipment. She had cigarettes plus a lighter, two knives, as well as an automatic handgun, with 8 bullets. Though it wasn't the best possible situation, it was plenty after being forced to suddenly leave her hideout. Sneaking through the forest, she would attack a tourist at the nearby town, stealing money and passport so that she could return to the Empire.

Though she would have preferred not to stand out, she had to give in to one desire of hers. But, the second she put a cigarette in her mouth, about to light it up, unnatural sounds arrived at her ears. The rustling of leaves. A boar, or maybe a deer. Olivia readied her knife in the left hand, handgun in her right. Footsteps. One belonged to a small animal, and the other—
Standing on two legs?

"Don't tell me—"

Did [Kagaribi] find her already? No, who arrived in front of Olivia—

"—Yo."

A white-haired girl—Zibia. Wearing clothes that looked adequate for battle, she jumped out from the shadow of a tree. Without a moment's delay, she fired the gun. The bullet hit the tree Olivia hid her body behind.

"Don't run away now, Olivia-san."

At her feet stood a small, black bunny. She must have used him to trace her scent. What a blunder, to think she had an animal at her disposal. No, even more important than that—

"You're...alive? How did you survive that grenade..."

"We have some excellent allies, see. You were pretty careless, not even checking if you properly finished us off."

"Right..."

“Or—was it because you were too busy running away from a certain someone?”

“.....”

Bulls-eye. In other words, the girls had seen through Olivia’s true goal here.

“There’s no need for our Boss to appear on stage—I’ll be your opponent.”

“I advise you don’t look down on me.”

The two were holding this conversation in an overgrown, ever-green forest.

They stood apart at around twenty meters. Between them, several pine

trees, acting as a means of defence. Rather than making this a war of bullets, Olivia would have preferred not to use a single one against this girl.

Hence, he readied her knife.

“It’s true that I have to be aware of your boss, but that’s only because Roland told me.”

“Roland?”

“The man you call [Shikabane]. Don’t ever use his name again.”

Before, when she had listened in on the girls in their room. She would not allow them to call him with that name again.

“You sure about this? Telling us his real name.” Zibia’s laughing voice came from the shadow of the trees.

“No problems at all. I’ll just have to kill you right now.” Olivia lowered her hips. “Roland didn’t order me to be careful of some snotty brats like you.”

The annoying white-haired girl, the clumsy silver-haired girl, and the gloomy red-haired girl, they were all so much of a bother Olivia felt like puking. She might have been waiting for a chance like this, all to let out her frustration.

“—Die.”

Together with these words, Olivia dashed out of the shadows, shooting towards the location Zibia was hiding. The girl returned a shot of her own. Using the sound of that, Olivia was able to locate her. In a moment’s time, she closed the distance.

On the way there, Zibia continued to shoot her gun two, three times, but by using the trees on the way, she could guard against these. They only graced Olivia’s skin, if at all. A single bullet against the threat of a small brat.

Nothing more was needed.

“Roland is the strongest assassin.” Olivia smiled. “As his disciple, I learned all his tricks.”

Putting the gun into her leg holster, she kept one hand free. Closing in on Zibia, the girl was right about to point the muzzle of her gun at Olivia, but it was already too late. The mistake of an amateur, relying too much on the gun. Using the knife, she sent the gun of Zibia flying. Following that, she used her open hand to form a fist, striking it right into the girl’s face. With her slender body, Zibia was sent flying, collapsing on the ground.

—She really is no enemy.

In the end, she was still a brat. In terms of being spies, she was inexperienced. No problems here. All Olivia had to do was finish her off with

the knife. Zibia let out a groan, most likely having hit her head on the ground. She showed no signs of getting up. Holding her head, she let out a defeated 'Shit, I failed to read your true skill'.

Olivia ignored this, just kicking on the ground, jumping towards her. She aimed at Zibia's slender neck, swinging her knife. However, right as she was sure of her victory, she heard an arrogant voice.

"Ain't ya pretty slow, Olivia-san?"

Zibia was disappearing, and the knife only cut through the air.

Eh...?

She was confused. Not from the shock that her attack was evaded. Rather, this eerie, uncanny sensation slowly started to dwell up inside her body. Unable to follow what just happened, her body flew into the air, her legs swept away. She wanted to move her hands to gain a stable halt, but in the way of that, her arm was grabbed. Like that, she fell to the ground, landing on her butt in an unsightly fashion.

"Full of openings." A cold voice came from above her head.

This is bad—Right as she thought so, her arm was released. Immediately after, she felt the presence of a knife approaching her left shoulder. Though she barely managed to avoid this strike, her back was cut instead. A burning sensation, together with the pain of blood loss. Though it wasn't a life-threatening wound, it was still a lot of damage for her.

In a panic, Olivia separated from Zibia. Not even chasing after her, the girl just showed a confident expression.

"I've seen this guy go serious a while ago, so something of this level is pretty slow."

".....!"

Olivia bit her lip for a second, but immediately relaxed again.

Why would I panic against someone like her? This is no big deal.

She was a bit surprised at the girl's speed, but that alone was not enough to make her lose her calm. Once she took her distance, she would have the advantage again.

I thought I could do this without the gun, but it doesn't matter much.

The same act didn't work. But even more than that.

Once I get my distance from her, how is she planning on winning?

She wanted to save the bullets, but it couldn't be helped. Taking a back-step, Zibia was further away now. However, right as Olivia wanted to reach for her gun in the holster, she met empty air.

"Eh...?"

"Sorry, but if you're looking for the gun at your thighs."

In front of her, Zibia showed a grin.

"—I stole it already."

In her hand, she had Olivia's gun. Without any hesitation, she fired it.

Lily was running through the forest, all on her own. She just ran towards the sun of the nearby gunshots.

"Just when I thought we were both going to do this, she left me behind..." They made up their resolve at the same time, and yet Lily had to chase after them. Their physical endurance and speed were just too different. Now, it seemed like Zibia had engaged Olivia in a fight already. Needless to say, this showed how motivated she was.

In hand-to-hand combat, Zibia-chan is a scary opponent after all...

Outstanding physical abilities, paired with her bad habit of stealing stuff all over the board. If it's a pure one-on-one, nobody out of the girls could hope to challenge her. She was the combat specialist of [Tomoshibi]. As long as the enemy wasn't Ron or Guido, she should be able to stand her ground.

"She really shines with raw strength, that white-haired orangutan!"

Knowing that the person in question wasn't present, Lily could run her mouth. Then again, would she be able to do the same thing as Zibia was right now?

"...I will accept her as my right arm in leadership." She proudly announced. —Shut it.

She felt like someone retorted from far away.

A bullet scraped past Olivia's right cheek. Suffering a wound on her precious face, her body was burning in rage. That being said, she had to calm down at all costs. Right now, this was a battle between life and death. Her distance between Zibia was too far to battle her with a knife, but also too close to directly evade any incoming bullet.

—The worst possible situation.

She turned her back to Zibia, and started dashing towards the big trees. In order to not be hit by any more bullets, she made circles as she ran. Dirt and branches blew past her feet and ears. The bullets Olivia tried to save so dearly were all used by Zibia now. She would probably try to finish this battle right here. That's what Olivia would try at least. At the same time, she used all the techniques she learned from Roland to escape.

"...Tch." Zibia's clicking of her tongue resounded from her back.

Around the time she had shot the last bullet, Olivia managed to hide in the shadow of a big tree. In the end, she was only scraped by that first bullet, as the others went hit the air.

She's bad at shooting...? Even though she has such high physical ability?

Whilst sighing in relief after having survived this death rodeo, a doubt was born inside her head. If she had been in the position of Zibia, she would have killed her without hesitation. What reason was there to let her escape?

Something is weird...?

Something didn't quite fit inside her head.

That reminds me, why did she just let go of my body?

It was a well-executed surprise attack. Having her arm grabbed, pulled to the ground. Yet, when Zibia could have swung the knife, she let go of Olivia's arm.

'Just like you can't always be in perfect condition, the enemy might not be either.'

She remembered Roland's words.

'Remember well what kind of arm the enemy is using during combat.'

Just now, Zibia only used—her left arm.

Arriving at that fact, a laugh leaked out of Olivia's mouth. She stepped out of the shadow from a big tree. Zibia should not have any more bullets left. Nothing there to be afraid of. Even if she still had some, she probably still wouldn't be able to hit her.

"When you were working as a maid, you were skillfully hiding it." Olivia smiled at Zibia. "Your right arm's the dominant one, isn't it? You got an injury?"

"!"

Seeing that reaction, Olivia was convinced. As of right now, Zibia could not fight at her full potential. She would not let down her guard again. Not to mention that she didn't have to worry about bullets. All she had to do was hunt down the prey in front of her.

Zibia showed a regretful expression as she grit her teeth, and threw the empty gun to the side. She took her knife in hand, and readied herself. However, she didn't attack. Instead, she sunk to half the size, and slowly retreated.

Olivia chased after her, meeting knives. Following that, she aimed at her waist, sending off a kick. Even though Zibia could have defended against this easily by using her right arm, she didn't. Instead, she let out a scream.

"What was that about being slow?"

"!"

"Acting strong, all for nothing!"

Next, she aimed her knife at Zibia's face as she brought her knife closer. Though Zibia managed to fend this off, the knife was blown out of her hand.

"And? Do you still have some weapons left?"

"I don't need any of your fake worrying."

Zibia took a step back, flashing a smile.

"—I stole it already."

Putting one hand in her pocket, she revealed another knife, the one Olivia had in reserve. She managed to steal it in that short moment.

"You damned thief..."

With that, the only weapon Olivia had at her disposal was this single knife in her hand. But, there was nothing to be afraid of. The situation had turned, and Olivia would not lose again in hand-to-hand combat. All her movements with her right arm were a bluff. Now that she knows about this, she could deal with it.

"In the end, we've got the same weapon. You can't win against me."

"...Good moment to quit, huh?"

Together with these words, Zibia jumped backwards. She probably planned on escaping. After giving it a second to think about—Olivia chased after her.

Olivia had finished her evaluation of Zibia. One day, she might turn into a threat for the Empire. Even if the chances were slim, she could become a danger for her loved one. And also—

“That way’s a cliff.”

“Wha...”

In the direction Zibia wanted to escape to, a cliff waited. The second the pine trees vanished, the scenery opened up immensely. This made things easier for Olivia.

“You weren’t aware?” Olivia asked. “I was told to ‘Always check the accurate topography of your mission grounds’, you know.”

“I was told to ‘Love the terrain like a defenseless baby’.”

“The heck is that?”

“That’s what I want to know.”

Gazing down the cliff, Zibia sighed. Though it wasn’t anything impossible to climb down, you would need the necessary equipment.

“—You’re really not being loved.” Olivia laughed.

“Huh?”

“This reminds of the time I talked to that nutjob of a woman.”

“...You mean Grete?”

“I told her that you all were not getting any love.” Olivia put one hand on her chest. “Roland taught me everything he knew. What did [Kagaribi] teach you?”

“...Nothing concrete comes to mind.”

“Then, did he embrace you in bed?”

“! D-Don’t make me imagine something weird!”

“Roland did so many, many times. Showering me with love, showering me with skills, he gave me everything I wanted. If there was something I didn’t understand, he would teach me until I did, giving me guidance all the time.” For the girls, that must be guidance never obtainable. Olivia leaned forward.

“—And exactly because he loves me, he taught me how to read bloodlust.” Following that, a gunshot rang out, and Olivia dodged the bullet. The one who had fired the bullet was Lily.

“That’s why people hate geniuses.”

So she was still alive as well. Judging from that, Grete must be alive as well.

“To think you were also a spy.”

“A maid is just many masks of the great Lily-chan.”

With the gun in her right hand, Lily grabbed something in her left. Inside the darkness, it was illuminated by the moonshine. Needless, around ten centimeters long, with the tips dripping liquid. Most likely, poison.

“Now then, this is the real deal. We’ll show you our greatest combination.”

Lily showed a confident smile, as Zibia readied her knife as well.

The two of them were on close terms. No doubting it, they would have some flawless teamwork. That being said, no problems whatsoever. Olivia had Roland’s teachings with her.

‘Fighting two versus one, standing between the two attackers.’

Olivia stood in the direct line connecting Zibia and Lily. To that, Lily’s expression grew cloudy, knowing that she wouldn’t be able to use her gun, in the risk of hitting her ally. All that was left was to overwhelm them with her superior hand-to-hand combat. And, just as expected, the two attack Olivia at the same time.

“Here we go!” Lily creamed, and Zibia returned a short “Let’s go!”

Perfectly harmonizing, Zibia was the first to move. She tightly held on to the knife in her working left hand, jumping at Olivia. Though her speed was rather annoying to deal with, fighting against that would be possible, knowing that her right arm was rendered useless. Olivia stood head-on to her, intercepting her attack. But, her strike had more force behind it than Olivia had imagined. As a result, the knife was blown away.

“An opening!”

Lily approached from her back, openly stating the fact of the opening. She didn’t have the same kind of agility as Zibia, as Olivia only had to take a step to the side.

“Ah?”

“Eh.”

What followed after, nobody could have ever seen coming.

Lily stabbed her poisoned needles deeply—into Zibia’s thigh.

Right away, Zibia’s facial color grew worse.

“You...moron...”

Apparently, that was quite the strong poison she used. Sweat started pouring from her entire body. Her body was convulsing, as she grew light-headed.

“Friendly-fire, huh.” Olivia laughed. “The worst kind of combination I’ve seen so far.”

Watching the scene in amusement, Olivia followed up with a kick to Lily’s chin, making her fall down to the ground, together with the poisoned needles from her hands. As a test, Olivia picked up one of those, and softly touched the tip. Right away, she felt the tip of her finger grow numb.

“That’s some amazing poison right there.”

If you were to get stabbed by this, you sure wouldn’t hold out for too long.

“Sadly, your weapons have been stolen. So just take it easy.”

“G-Give them ba—”

“Sure.”

Olivia stabbed the poisonous needle right into Lily’s arm. Just like Zibia’s, her face turned snow white, as she fought hard to turn around, moving her legs, devoid of any strength.

“W-Water...” Her voice was about to break off.

“Even if you tried to run away, the cliff is right over there.”

They were no opponent after all. Lily lost consciousness like Zibia, and the two fell off the cliff. Though she tried gazing down to make sure, the darkness covered up any possible corpses. But, this time around, they

should be done for. Being met with such strong poison, they fell down a cliff with several tens of meters. They should have been annihilated for good. The battle had ended, and Olivia came out on top.

But, something is weird still...

Right as she finished taking care of the two girls, something piqued her interest.

Why are these girls coming to fight me, and not [Kagaribi]? The difference in skill is that apparent...They're dropping like flies for no reason.

She had assumed that this man would be around them

The first day I spotted [Kagaribi]...the person who wasn't present...who could be good with disguises...and possessed a body stature similar to a man...

It didn't take much time to come up with the conclusion.

"—[Kagaribi] is not here."

If so, then there was no need to be afraid anymore.

I see...so it was to make the enemy be careful...

Knowing about it, Olivia couldn't help but laugh. She felt embarrassed for running away with her tail between her legs.

"I'm coming to kill you now, you lunatic of a woman."

Lily and Zibia both died. All that was left was to take care of Grete. Then, nobody would know of her secret anymore.

At the bottom of the cliff laid the two girls. The white-haired girl had her tongue stretched out in a pathetic manner, her eyes white as she lay collapsed. From time to time, her body would convulse, showing reactions that she was still alive, but not for much longer.

The silver-haired girl didn't move at all. Her eyes were closed tightly as if she was asleep, facing upwards towards the night sky. The poisoned needle was still stuck deeply inside her arm, but—

"—Heave-ho." The silver-haired girl lifted up her body.

Having made sure that nobody was watching, she took out the antidote, and had Zibia drink it, slapping her in the face to wake her up.

"Gah!"

The white-haired girl opened her eyes.

"Ahhh! I thought I was going to—"

Right as she screamed, her face got buried in the ground again. Her knees convulsed, giving her no way of getting up.

"This poison brings you into a state of near death. Don't force yourself."

"Bleehhh..." Zibia vomited whatever was left in her stomach. "What about you...?"

"I drank the antidote before, and I have a good resistance against poison."

Lily showed a peace sign.

"We...I still can't move from this place though."

Lily did indeed have resistance against poison. She carried Zibia during their fall, and dampened the impact by using wires on the way down to slow their speed.

"Thanks. If I had continued to fight like that, I would have been killed no doubt." Zibia took a long sip from the water she received. "I'm surprised you came up with this. Poison that could save your allies."

"I got the idea back when I stabbed Sensei with my poisonous needle."

"Your timing is horrible!"

There, Zibia glared up at the top of the cliff.

"I wonder if we managed to deceive her. I wanted her to get at least a bit more damage..."

"It worked out just fine. Olivia-san made her way back to the mansion."

Lily and Zibia did a perfect job.

—During their battle with Olivia, they both died. Zibia stole all her weapons, and Lily used her poisonous needles. Watching the two fall off the cliff, Olivia would think that they died for good this time. And then, she would most likely arrive at the fact that Ron is not here.

"She really was careless. Even I wouldn't scream 'An opening!' in the middle of the fight like that."

"You still do from time to time."

"It's all perfect acting."

"My ass."

Retorting, Zibia lifted half of her body up. They had done their job. All that was left was for Grete to follow up with her part. In their current condition, they could only hope for her to finish the job.

"...Hey, is Grete really going to be fine?" Zibia looked over at Grete. "Hand-to-hand battle like that isn't her strong forte, right? How is she planning on winning against Olivia?"

She was the tactical person, using calculations and strategy. If one counted from the bottom of the weakest girls in [Tomoshihi], she would appear almost immediately. Fighting in orthodox fashion, she should have no way of winning against Olivia. She would just be slaughtered.

"Hmm...I don't think you have to be worried about her?" Lily's response couldn't be more light-weighted.

"You..." Zibia sighed in disbelief. "So lax even though—"

"I mean, her determination is just on a whole other level." Lily muttered.

"Devising, guidance, orders, support, and the method to corner the target—she did all of that while acting as Sensei himself almost. I don't think someone like her could lose in the final stretch."

Naturally, Zibia knows about her determination. Becoming an alter ego of the world's strongest spy. Hearing this ridiculous idea come from Grete, Zibia had no words to return.

"I knew that she was something else, but..." Zibia spoke up. "She was staggering quite a bit towards the end, right? She doesn't have much endurance to begin with."

If not for Lily's help, Grete would have collapsed today even. Yet, she proudly declared.

—Once Olivia-san returns to the mansion, I will settle this with her.

With her body suffering from fatigue and exhaustion, she was going to fight all on her own.

Lily sighed.

"For now, we have to believe in her. In our chief."

Directing her gaze towards the mansion, she smiled kindly.

“Get that success under your records, be praised by Sensei—and then loved to your heart’s content.”

The sounds of gunshots coming from the forest even reached to Grete's ears. Zibia and Lily must be fighting by now. Them being inexperienced still, fake graduated from an educational facility, unlike the enemy they were forced to fight. Though Zibia winning before anything else would be the dream, that most likely wouldn't be granted. The second she had to participate with an injury, she would end up on the losing end. Yet, she still stepped forward, so Grete had to be thankful still.

—Olivia would come here.

She had finished the preparations for the stand-off. But, no matter how much confidence she had, the anxiety dwelling inside of her wouldn't vanish.

This is the responsibility the Boss is carrying...

In Ron' stead, she designed the plan. In Ron' stead, she gave the orders. In Ron' stead, she would face the enemy.

All of these facts piled up, weighing down heavily on her shoulders.

How easy it would be if I could just run away from this place.

She tightly grasped her charm—the the fountain pen—as she remembered a certain conversation.

‘The enemy is a fiendish assassin. I will pick the four strongest girls, and fight them directly. You and the other remaining three will instead challenge the assistant of Shikabane, taking them down. Can you do it?’

Hearing Ron' question, Grete answered with an immediate 'I accept'.

Because she had prepared herself. To become an existence that could spoil her Boss, if only a little bit.

However, that determination was now starting to waver. From the bottom of her heart, intense fear started to make its way to her head.

I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm
scared. I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm
scared. I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm
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scared. I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm
scared. I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared.

She wanted to have Ron next to her. She wanted him to protect her. To save her. Embrace her shaking shoulders, not once again letting her go.

I want to...run away immediately...

However, what pressed this down were Ron's words.

'Feel free to run away.' He spoke with a kind expression. 'At that time, I will handle things myself. Though I don't have a particular plan in mind, I should be able to come up with one on the spot. So, no problem. Cutting my sleep schedule to only two hours, I will—'

Hearing that much, Grete shook her head.

'...I will not run away.'

Remembering this, the cowardice filling her body was blown away.

If I were to run away here, he would do something ridiculous again...

She could already see it. In order to not see his allies killed, in order to protect the country his previous allies loved, he would carry it all. Even if he called himself the world's strongest spy, he was still but a human being. One day, he would suffer from fatigue. And then, he would die. Just as his allies did.

That is why I have to stand my ground here.

The enemy didn't matter. Because she had a promise with Ron.

'Could I ask for one thing...?'

Right before they departed for the mission, Grete came asking.

'In the occasion that we successfully clear the mission, could you hug me...?'

Ron narrowed his eyebrows. Apparently, he was thinking about what words to respond with. It was quite the rare expression to see. Grete showed a kind smile.

'You don't have to take it that seriously. I just wanted supportive words.'

'—Alright. I promise.' With sincere eyes, he announced. 'Once you come back alive, I will embrace you with all my might.'

Just these words alone gave Grete limitless courage. The shaking in her legs stopped, as she tightly grasped the fountain pen, facing forward.

The sound of footsteps resounded. Her thoughts were forcefully disrupted.

Lifting up her head, Olivia stood in front of her. Holding a knife in her hand, she stood on the roof.

"Huh? You've been waiting for me, I see."

Stealing all possible weapons from Olivia had been Zibia's task. Yet, she didn't want to think that the operation had failed. She must have grabbed it from her own room.

Olivia flashed a relaxed smile.

"I killed Zibia and Lily."

Just as planned. She didn't have the time to check.

"If I kill you now as well, nobody will know of my secret."

"...Who knows, there is a chance that I have already informed Uwe-san about this..."

"Doesn't matter. I can lure in whatever old man I want." Olivia licked her red lips.

Changing the hold of the knife into her opposite hand, she slowly approached Grete. She controlled her breathing. There was no place to escape.

—It's time to bring an end to this mission.

Ron would be fighting Shikabane, and come out victorious. Hence, she could not lose here.

"Now then." Olivia lowered her waist. "Time for some great slaughter."

"...Just as expected."

Grete stuffed the fountain pen into her chest, and instead took out an automatic handgun. Not having much physical strength, she used other guns from the girls. Having it ready, she fired immediately. However, Olivia moved a tad bit faster. With keen and nimble movement, she threw the knife, as the knife blocked the bullet, changing the trajectory. Missing its aim, the bullet flew off into the darkness.

In response to Olivia approaching, Grete triggered her trap. From a dead angle of her enemy, an arrow came shooting, not making any sound. With the sound of the gunshot just filling her ears, she should not be able to pick up on that.

"Not happening." A voice filled with scorn.

Olivia twisted her body, evading the arrow flying in from behind. The arrow missed, soaring off into the dark of night. Grete groaned. The enemy could feel her killing intent. Just like Ron, this was a spy held by first-rate spies. And since this attack failed—what followed was hand-to-hand combat.

Olivia had already arrived right in front of Grete. In response, Grete changed the way she held the gun, now using the grip as a hammer, swimming it down at the head region of Olivia. However, she was even faster, and delivered a kick straight at Grete's flank. Not given the time to push up her collapsed body, her chest was punched. Resulting that, she dropped the gun, groveling.

—On a completely different level.

Her every move was worlds faster than what Grete could muster. It didn't even matter how she moved. The second she started an action, Olivia already finished hers.

—The difference in skill is overwhelming.

Right the moment when Grete wanted to lift her head, Olivia was in front of her, grabbing her by the neck. Her breathing came to a halt, as painful groans escaped her mouth. She grabbed Olivia's arm in an attempt to shake her off, but she didn't have the strength to battle her. Kicking her didn't work either.

"Absolutely useless. What a let-down." Olivia continued to constrict Grete without restraint. "You were fated to lose this from the very beginning. Yet, you didn't even understand that?"

"..."

"Ah, right. Your teacher never taught you anything, right. What a poor thing."

There, Olivia relaxed her hand a bit, dropping Grete's body onto the roof. Lucky for her, because she was about to pass out from the lack of oxygen. She rolled down the roof, trying to reach for the gun, but Olivia kicked that away.

"Hey, you're good with disguises, right?" She stepped on the back of Grete's hand. "Tell me. How were you planning on winning this? Even if you put on a mask, that would take you ten seconds at least, with both your hands busy. No matter how you think about it, you're not made up for battle, right? You lose the second you start a one-on-one." Olivia picked up Grete's gun.

With that, she lost her one and only weapon.

"But, this is fine. I'm a kind person, so I give you one last chance."

Olivia pointed the muzzle of the gun at her.

"—Jump off."

"...Jump...off?"

"Yep, jump off the roof right now."

Before Grete could give an answer, Olivia kept the muzzle at her hand, forcefully pulling up Grete by the chest. Following that, she pushed her towards the edge of the roof. She could barely keep herself from falling down. In front of her eyes was a garden filled with brick pavement, more than ten meters away from Grete's current location.

"This is the third floor. If you're lucky, you won't die."

"...What are you planning...making it look like a suicide?"

"Just fits better. I'll push the guilt of having killed Lily and Zibia onto you."

Grete felt the muzzle hitting her back. It was pressed right at the spot of her heart. A distance close enough that one shot would be enough to kill her.

"I'll give you a choice. Be shot to death here, or try your luck and jump off."

"That's..."

"Raise both of your hands, and take one step forward. If you don't, I'll shoot."

Her tone made it sound like she was used to it. She must have used these words countless times so far. If she were to resist, she would be killed right away. She might survive if she jumped off here. Being faced with these two choices, everybody would take the second. Shikabane and Olivia had continued to kill in this gruesome fashion.

"...!" A small groan came from Grete's mouth.

She bit her lip, and lifted both her hands. Not trying any sort of resistance, she took one step towards the rim of the roof. Olivia stuck to her back. She would not remove the gun.

"Yes, that's just fine."

No chances of escaping. With one more step, Grete would fall off. She would hit the bricks below, ending up as a corpse with dislocated and broken bones. Though she gave Grete a choice, the end results here were pretty much the same. Even if Grete somehow managed to save herself as she

jumped off, holding onto the roof or the like, Olivia could just finish her off with the gun.

“Good for you.” A laugh came from Olivia. “If you die, your teacher will love you more than now. As your Senpai at work, I will tell him just how much of a diligent maid you were.”

Apparently, Grete’s death was written in stone. Thinking that, Grete shook her head. There was a misunderstanding Olivia had.

“...Even if I die, I will not be loved.”

Her lips moved on their own.

“...The Boss doesn’t hold any special affection towards me. I know that all too well.”

“You poor thing.” Olivia spoke with a sympathetic voice.

Yet again, Grete shook her head. Wrong. If she made it back alive, he would embrace her.

“That’s why...I cannot die here...”

If she died, she didn’t gain anything. She didn’t save anything, anyone.

There was no hope, no happy end, no paradise, nothing. She had to get there herself. No matter how cruel the mission may be, no matter how impossible the path may seem, she would make it back.

—She will live, so that she may be loved.

“...In order to have the Boss accept me, I have to come back alive.”

“What a shame. You will die today. No matter what you do, you cannot hope to win against me!” Olivia pushed the muzzle of the gun on Grete’s back.

Her body was forced to take a step.

“Now, hurry up and jump off!”

A sense of floating. Her body separated from solid ground. And, right after, what arrived at Grete’s ears—

—The sound of a gunshot.

She immediately turned her body around. The bullet grazed her shoulder, as her clothes ended up in shreds.

“Eh...” Olivia forced out a puzzled voice.

Her collarbone had been pierced by a bullet.

Her body fell backwards. Right before Grete was about to fall down the roof, she stretched out her hands, reaching up to the rim of the roof. She had been about to plunge to her death. Climbing up the roof to reach a save position, she checked for the enemy.

The bullet must have smashed the bone, which was now oppressing lungs and throat. Blood came flowing out of Olivia’s mouth, as her body laid lifelessly on the roof. She tried her best to suppress the blood from leaking out of her chest, but it didn’t stop. It was one shot to overturn the situation.

“W...hy...?”

Lying face down, Olivia muttered.

—Even though I can sense any killing intent.

She probably wanted to say these words. This was something she learned by battling Ron. A surprise attack wouldn’t work against a first-rate spy. No

killing intent, no ill-will. Not to mention any good-will either, if it was someone like Ron. However, there were ways around it.

“...Just as expected.” Grete looked down at Olivia. “...You were the let-down. I had prepared other countermeasures, but to think you would force your target off the roof—The method used the most by Shikabane.” On top of that, she took the voice of Olivia. “—You were only taught, I see.”

“...!” Olivia spit up blood. “Why...was there no killing intent...”

“...You will get it right away.”

Right as these words aligned, a scream was heard from the garden below.

“You ran away again?! You damned assassin!”

It came from Uwe. As if something clicked in the head of Olivia, she looked up in a panic. And then, her eyes opened wide.

“Of course you wouldn’t feel any killing intent...Because that bullet was actually aimed at me...” Grete muttered softly. “Codename [Manamusume] — Let us spend this time lamenting in laughter.”

Grete used Olivia’s eyes as a mirror, confirming her own appearance one more time.

—A mark.

Like it was clinging to Grete. Burning in an ominous red, just by looking at it, it could invoke a feeling of disgust, grating at one’s consciousness. It resembled the sight of a demon.



Olivia groaned in a daze. “A disguise...?”

Her eyes spoke for herself. With the mark in front of her, she was shrinking back. And that was fine. Those who had seen it once would not forget it a second time—that was the goal of this mark. Naturally, Uwe must have remembered it right away.

“The reason I appeared a second time in front of Uwe-san as the assassin wasn’t to pull you out, it was to make sure he would shoot me without hesitation.”

Grete found out that he was a skilled shooter with her first and second attack. Though the first shot had been a miss because of his night blindness, now that Zibia had worked in curing that, and the second shot was much more accurate. All that was left was to guide Uwe. He would see Grete with the mark, and shoot without hesitation. If Grete managed to avoid that, the bullet would hit Olivia behind her.

It can be compared to the poisonous needle without any ill-intent.

This was basically a reworked version of the previous plan that failed against Ron.

—Use every person at your disposal, without buying them.

—Forget about ill-intent, don’t even make them feel good-will.

With these principles, she came up with this plan.

—A perfect bullet containing no ill-will, no good-will, not even killing intent.

“Im...possible...”

Olivia still didn’t quite accept the reality in front of her.

“...What might that be?”

“Your disguise...was way too fast! You had both your hands up in the air! You shouldn’t have been able to do anything! I didn’t give you a moment to pull off the mask!”

No matter how fast she could react, putting on a mask would take ten seconds at least. Olivia was still set on that fact.

“You’re asking...how did I put on my disguise in that situation?” Grete asked in a calm voice.

Olivia’s mouth stayed open, as her expression froze up. Judging from that, she must have picked up on her misunderstanding. She was of the impression that Grete had changed into the assassin, and then changed into Ron. Subconsciously, she restricted her way of thinking. She assumed that the normal Grete **was not wearing a disguise**.

“...I haven’t disguised myself. It was the opposite. I took off my disguise.”

“Took off your disguise?”

“If it’s pulling off the mask, you would be able to do so in a single second, right...?”

Biting her lip, gritting her teeth, it didn’t matter. She would use whatever method needed. At the same time, Olivia’s eyes opened wide. She must have arrived at the conclusion herself.

—This uncanny mark, covering her face.

The second Olivia saw it she responded with 'Disgusting'. Even Uwe called it 'Ugly'. Not to mention Zibia and Lily, they both had expressions distorted in fear. Everybody would react in a similar way. The appearance would generate a feeling of disgust and hate, staying in one's memories. With this mark on her face, Grete took a sigh, and softly smiled.

"—This is my real face."

A mark she had from the moment of birth. The more she grew up, the more it spread, covering her face. The reason she couldn't adjust to the political world she was born into, it wasn't because of a fear of men—it was this mark. In a world where women needed to hold a certain level of beauty, she had no place she belonged to. Her father would often scold her for not being able to smile. Even calling her a 'Disgusting daughter'. Faking up an illness for her, he never took Grete anywhere, only locking her up inside her room. Her older brother showered her in rage as well, which led her to eventually become afraid of men. Before she realized it, she was sent out of the family, on to an educational facility for spies.

—Nobody loved her.

For a moment, Olivia couldn't move. She just continued to stare at Grete's face, as if time had stopped. Even the pain assaulting her, she ignored through this. You could still hear Uwe's screams from the garden. In this atmosphere, Grete and Olivia glared at each other. Finally, Olivia was the first one to act.

"Aha!"

A suspicious voice leaked out of her mouth.

"Ahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahaha!" She burst out in laughter.

Apparently, she wasn't too bothered if her wound opened again. She just held her stomach, laughing to her heart's content.

"...is there something funny about this?" Grete asked, clearly bothered.

"No, it just all made sense now." Olivia wiped away the tears at her eyes.

"The reason you're that gloomy and heavy."

"....."

"Makes sense you wouldn't be loved." Olivia stood up ever so slowly.

"That's why—I'll be the one to win."

She pressed her fingers into the wound, and pulled out the bullet as her expression was distorted in agony. She cut off part of her clothes with a knife, using it as a compression on her wound.

"...You plan on fighting with such a wound?"

"Huh? Don't be like that. Pathetic." Raising the palm of her hand, Olivia smiled. "There is one fault here with me. That I tried taking care of this problem by myself—Women that are loved will always have the men come to their rescue." In said palm of her hand was a jade green brooch.

Crushing this with her fingers, a small, round device remained.

"...A transmitter."

“Good. Seems like Roland will be coming over here in a second. I’m so happy.”

The red light on the transmitter started blinking faster and faster. It probably symbolized the distance Roland had to them.

“Five days ago, when [Kagaribi] appeared, I requested help from Roland. Although it was your disguise, it still works just fine.”

“—!” Grete swallowed her breath.

The disguise of Ron was to seal the enemy’s movement, but that back-fired now. Grete hurried in taking out her gun, but the enemy still showed relaxation.

“Oh, you’re going to finish me? Fine, go ahead. If you do, you’ll enrage Roland. He’ll cut you into pieces, and not just you. The people living here in this residence, the people living in the town, disregarding if woman or child! Because! He! Love mes!”

The blinking on the device grew even faster. Grete felt her heart tighten up in the face of failure. Her vision grew hazy and dark. Ron should have been on his way to defeat Shikabane, but because of her mistake, it probably became a hindrance. She couldn’t believe that Ron would immediately catch up on the moving Shikabane. The strongest assassin was making his way here—

“...It doesn’t matter.”

The only thing keeping her heart from breaking was stubbornness. As if she prayed, she kept whispering ‘Just as expected...everything is...just as expected...’. It became something like a catchphrase, a habit of hers.

—For her, only able to change her face and identity, she could only live in the world of spies.

That’s why she had to be more clever than anybody else. No matter the circumstances, she could not crumble. If not, who would even bother to love someone like her—?

Around the time the blinking on the device came to a stop, just shining constantly, Olivia screamed.

“Die, right here! Not loved by anybody, cursed by your disgusting face!”

Something came flying down from the sky. Olivia flashed a grin—

“Eh...?”

Only for her to freeze up.

—A giant black suitcase landed between Grete and Olivia.

For whatever reason, it came soaring from the sky. Possibly a part of Olivia’s plot? However, she was just as confused herself. Who, from where, for what reason, why did this suitcase appear? And, the biggest mystery of it all, was that this suitcase looked awfully familiar—

“What a pitiful fellow.”

She turned around. In this space, which should have only inhabited Grete and Olivia, there stood a single man. Apparently, he was the one who had thrown the suitcase.

"I don't understand. That there could be someone who doesn't feel anything after seeing her face." The man continued leisurely. "I still can't forget it. The scenery back at the shower room."

Shower room. In these words, Grete remembered as well.

—The day most blissful and wonderful in her entire life.

Normally wearing the disguise at all times, she was careful during the times she washed her face. She would enter the bath with her mask on, wiping her real face back at her room. However, there were times when she wanted to shower without the mask on. And that day, she had her guard down. She used the small shower room instead of the wide open bath, to not be seen by anybody. But that backfired.

"The second I saw her real face, it all connected. Just how much skill and talent she had to acquire in order to be loved. Just how much she had continued to train herself. Radiating, making me sense the marvelous heart she possessed, I was entranced."

Ron continued to walk forward, until he arrived next to Grete.

"That's why I subconsciously muttered back then."

Ron turned towards Grete.

"—Beautiful."

Grete just admired his face in awe. It was the real Ron. Neither a disguise, nor her fantasy, the person she loved was right next to her. **The only person in this world who had praised her real face.**

Olivia on her end was still puzzled. She could only gaze at Ron in fear.

"Where's Roland?" She screamed in confusion and fear. "Where is he?!"

"No need to panic like that. He's right in front of you, isn't he?" Ron spoke with no emotion.

He pointed at—the suitcase in front of them.

"Though he probably turned into a square."

Grete directed her gaze at the suitcase again. With a height of around one meter, the width measured at around 80 centimeters. If need be, you could probably stuff a grown man in there.

"Oli...via...?" A man's groan came out of the case.

Apparently, Ron had captured him alive. The mission was to only kill him, and yet he achieved something even more difficult.

"Why...?" Olivia muttered. "Didn't you say you were on par..."

"On par?" Ron tilted his head. "That reminds me, I wanted to ask something. The moment I encountered that man, he talked about being my 'Rival' and that I was his 'Destined Enemy', how we would be knowing each other for a long time now...What was that about?"

"What do you mean...?"

"He was far too weak." Ron spit out without any hesitation.

The man locked away in the suitcase—Shikabane—was a man far more stronger than Olivia and Grete, and yet he wasn't nearly strong enough to battle Ron.

"He's the type of person to take hostages, and kill without hesitation. Considering the risks, I needed some competent members, but that's about it. He was nearly not on the level of the world's strongest."

Olivia lost all her strength, just wildly shaking her head left and right. She slowly moved towards the case.

"This is a lie..." Her voice was about to break. "Hey, this is a lie, right? Say something, Roland..."

"Oli...via..." A weak voice came from the case. "Save...me..."

"—!"

Letting out a scream impossible to turn into words, Olivia collapsed. Her face was navy blue, as tears came streaming down her cheeks, her body shaking in despair. She hammered on the suitcase. Maybe to break to lock, or maybe to blame the person inside. Either way, the case wouldn't open no matter what she did.

"Grete." Ron spoke up.

"Yes...I have prepared it...a fitting pair."

She brought out another suitcase, hidden in the corner of the roof.

"This is your achievement. How about you end it yourself?"

"...I want to watch the gallant Boss."

For this, she wanted to be spoiled. Her hips were about to give out.

"Don't call me Boss." Ron muttered, as he grabbed the red suitcase.

With cold eyes, he moved towards Olivia.

"You have killed too much." He spoke as if to give the final verdict.

"Although this is a War waged in Shadows, you will not be forgiven for your deeds. Are you prepared for what's about to come?"

Olivia shook her head.

"I wasn't taught...any of that..." She slammed her fist onto the case again, spitting curses. "Roland has never taught me...even though he loved me..."

"I see. I understand the reason you lost." Ron lifted the suitcase. "You aren't even an enemy to consider."

Ron swung the suitcase, which opened like the mouth of a predator, swallowing up it's prey. Olivia's scream resounded one last time, but restrained inside the case, nothing more of her was heard. At the rooftop, a black and red suitcase were left behind. For two gruesome assassins, this was an awfully quiet end to their story.

1 [Bonfire]

2 [Deep Water]

3 [Dust King]

4 [Cool-headed]

5 [Crowbar]

Epilogue

Finding out about the details of the mission, and judging the difficulty, Ron showed a wry expression.

—The securing of an assassin. At the same time, catching their ally as well. Those were the conditions given to Ron.

—Each of them should be relatively strong on their own. If you catch one, the other will run away.

That would explain why this mission was higher in difficulty than the previous Impassable Mission. With just Ron alone, he would have trouble catching them at the same time. While Ron fought to secure Shikabane, someone else would be necessary to secure their ally.

While I'm busy with Shikabane, the other eight will have to fight the ally...

No, thinking about the risks, I would have to take them with me, but...

He was lost. His decision as a spy, and decision as the boss split his choices in half. In the midst of that, the one who gave a helping hand was Grete.

'...I will take the burden you carry, Boss.'

The girl would take guidance, strategy, and dealing with the enemy all on her own. And, she perfectly took care of it all.

Inside the library room, Uwe and Olivia were facing each other. A few years had passed, where Olivia had acted as the head of the maids. They had gotten to a relationship where they wouldn't have to hold back their words. To think that the day of break-up would arrive faster than the end of his lifespan.

"You're not going to change your decision to quit, right?"

She had prepared herself for these words, but they still left her in sadness.

"I'm sorry, Uwe-san. I just can't win against this fear." Wearing her private attire, the girl lowered her head.

"If it's an assassin, I can just blast him away with my gun."

"We weren't able to find the corpse. And, I have decided to live with an acquaintance. You just make sure you treasure your life some more, Uwe-san."

Uwe cast his head down. Keeping her here proved impossible. Being young like her, he couldn't blame Olivia for fearing assassins. At the very least, he wanted to give her a few words as a parting gift, for having worked so long under him.

"There a man waiting for you?"

Olivia's eyes opened wide.

"Oh? Did I ever tell you about my lover?"

"Don't take me for a fool! I can tell as much with intuition!"

"...That is the Uwe-san I know."

"Indeed. That's why, as a well-meant advice." He continued, knowing that he was just meddling in her business. "Olivia, I always felt maliciousness from that man. Whenever you came back from your travels, you were clad in this polluted scent."

"....."

"I cannot possibly think that you are being loved. He just goes to line up fake, empty words, using you as much as he can, and then throws you away. That's all I can see here."

Olivia opened her mouth ever so slightly, only to freeze up. Given these unexpected words at their final encounter, she must have been left baffled. Uwe followed up with warm words.

"Olivia, let me just tell you one thing. Pay close attention to his words, and how he responds. That will allow you to see through his feelings for you." The girl didn't know what he was talking about. Even though it sounded oddly familiar.

"...Then." Olivia showed a jesting smile. "What if I begged him to 'Say something', and all he returned was 'Save me', what would you say?"

Uwe snorted in arrogance.

"Peh! Can't see any value in a man like him!"

After laughing for a bit, and exchanging farewell gifts, Uwe saw Olivia off.

"Fuu..."

Having left Uwe's residence, Olivia—Grete, wearing a mask of Olivia, sighed. Though it was a man she had trouble dealing with, she somehow made it in the end.

She wanted to reveal the truth to Uwe, but that would have meant that she had to reveal their identities to him as well. Because he remembered them. In order to keep any sort of information about them in safety, telling of nothing at all was the safest choice.

"....."

Grete spotted a small puddle of water at the side of the street, and took a peek inside. Reflected there was Olivia's face. Though she had to create it in a hurry, it was perfectly done nonetheless. Her acting had worked out just fine as well. Yet, Uwe's last words remained in her head.

—Shikabane never loved Olivia.

Grete had never arrived at that possibility. Instead, she fully believed in Olivia's words. Yet, the moment she heard the words 'Save me', what did she feel?

"...Maybe we weren't actually that different." Grete spoke, gazing at the reflection in the water. "Farewell...Olivia-san."

Taking off the mask, she put it in her bag. Equally, she took off her clothes. With this, Olivia's existence would consign into oblivion. She and Shikabane were handed off to a different team. Nobody knew what kind of path she would take after the interrogation. That being said, the current mission had been an 'assassination' from the very beginning, or so Grete had heard.

Until the end of their employment, the girls continued to work as maids, seeing if they could find any more hints about Olivia or other possible allies. From the looks of it, she had continued to steal information from Uwe's resources, supporting the assassin, or even assassinating any maids that had caught on to her true identity.

During that time, Zibia worked to find some proper maids for Uwe, finally finishing the investigation about their backgrounds and such. Yet, the one reluctant to part was Zibia herself. At the same time, Uwe didn't wish for her to go either.

"Thanks to you, my body has been doing great recently." Those were Uwe's last words. "The law might even make it through the Parliament. The desire for Children's Welfare has been rising, Zibia."

Hearing this, Zibia nodded deeply.

"Great to hear that. I'll be passing by in the future, so you better be alive then."

"I'll do that without you telling me!"

Meeting final words, Zibia left Uwe's residence.

Awaiting the girls at the train station were Sara, Ron, as well as a surprise visitor.

"Bernard!!"

Both Zibia and Lily screamed at the same time, jumping at the birdcage.

Resting in there was an awfully familiar falcon. A fellow partner during the past mission, and something of a hero to them. Grete herself showed a sigh as well.

"...So he managed to survive."

"Though he won't be able to fly for a while, he's not in any immediate danger anymore."

Bandages were wrapped around both his wings. They must have been serious wounds, no doubting it, with Sara's immediate first-aid, he managed to survive. With his courageous act, he was undoubtedly a member of [Tomoshi] now. After they finished tending to the falcon, the girls directed their eyes over at the sole male, waiting in silence.

"Sensei, it's been a while...well, doesn't feel like it."

Ron nodded.

"You're right. I was on another mission the entire time."

"What about the others?"

"Now that Shikabane has been taken care of, they should be on some sightseeing, and then return home after."

No doubting it, the mission for the other girls must have been just as cruel as theirs. Although they had Ron with them, the enemy was a first-rate assassin.

Zibia clicked her fingers.

"Then, how about we relax a bit as well?"

"Right, we even got our pay as maids!"

The girls immediately started talking about places they wanted to see, foods they wanted to try. They had been working for almost an entire month now, so they needed a well-deserved break. They had pent-up desires and things they wanted to do, so that had to be taken care of. Gazing at the guidebook Sara brought with her, a heated debate ensued. Once they had made up their plans, Zibia called out to Ron.

"Hey, you should have the day free as well, right? Can you get us a car?"

"...Right, I'll go borrow one around here."

He wanted to repay his subordinates as well.

"Now I'm excited!" Lily raised a gleeful voice. "Let's go on a drive with the five of us!"

Once Ron returned with the car, only Grete stood there.

"....."

No sight of Lily, Zibia, or Sara anywhere. Even their belongings were gone.

"I'll ask just in case, but where are the others?"

"...They suddenly jumped on the steam train..."

"These girls only know how to lie, I see." Ron sighed.

Once they got back, Ron had to give Lily a lecture, after screaming 'A drive with the five of us!'. Then again, Ron had expected this much. They were being considerate of Grete. Or, even towards Ron himself.

"I borrowed the car already, so how about we go for a drive?"

"...Yes, gladly."

Ron had Grete sit on the passenger seat next to him, and had the car drive along the coast. With great weather going on, just watching the sea made one feel comfortable. Once they were alone, Ron feared that Grete might be trying another approach again. Most likely because it has been a month. She just sat in her seat, frozen still.

"Grete." Ron broke the ice. "During the last month, I was always thinking about you. How I should face you and your affection, as your Boss, as the world's strongest spy, and as a single man."

It was an awfully difficult endeavor for him. People are being moved, and led astray even by love countless times. For spies, especially during their mission. Having the target develop feelings for them was an easy method to control them, have them move according to your own will. That being said, he could not treat her love this roughly.

"So you've arrived at a conclusion...?" Grete asked, clearly worried about his next words.

"Yeah." Ron stopped his car at the side of the road.

"Taking out logic, responsibility, and facade, I will give my response as a single man."

Ron stepped out of the car, and Grete followed. Standing on top of a cliff, with a wonderful scenery, the two faced each other. She would not be able to run away from his response. She had her lips shut tightly, watching Ron. With the breeze hitting her, Grete's hair shook gently.

"Grete, let me be straight with you. I cannot accept your feelings. I cannot respond to your love for me."

"...Yes."

"But, I want you to understand one thing. This is me being unable to hold any of this affection towards anybody. The reason we can't be lovers is not because you aren't charming or any of that sort. The fault lies with me. I don't desire any sexual love." Ron continued. "What I want is familial love. Spending a normal day after a harsh mission, and living in the bonds we created."

Allies who would accept him, and save him from solitude.

"Grete, this is why I cannot respond to your feelings. Now that I cannot love you as a woman, if you find yourself another man, I will not blame you."

"....."

"That being said, if you were to let me stay next to you, I will love you—as family."

The wind blew stronger, her hair hiding Grete's expression in the wind. Once that expression appeared once again, her face had been riddled with tears.

"...I have...a wish." She said, with a thin voice.

Grete touched her face, and pulled off her mask. Together with the giant mark, her beet red face appeared.

"Just one word...just one sentence...right now, from your mouth..."

"Now that's an easy task for once."

Ron reached out for the girl's mark, touched it, and gently ran his fingers along.

"—Grete, you are beautiful."

Right with that, the girl's expression relaxed. She had both her hands on her mouth, desperate to hold back a voice. Eventually, tears started streaming down her cheeks, as she was unable to contain herself. Together with these tears falling to the ground, Grete jumped into Ron's arms, crying like a small child. Ron wrapped his hands around her, gently embracing her. The girl's codename is [Manamusume]. At first, he thought of this name as ironic. However, right now, no other name was more befitting.

NEW MISSION

By the time Ron and Grete returned to the Kagerou Palace, it was already deep in the night. Through most of the day, they just enjoyed their date. She wouldn't leave Ron's side for a moment. Checking on sightseeing spots, enjoying dinner on the train, they talked about whatever came to their mind.

How far was this familial love, and how far was it sexual love? Was this the right thing to do as the boss of the team? Wasn't he just making up convenient words? Many doubts were floating around inside his head, but he decided to ignore them. There was no correct choice in this world. Only actions to make it the correct choice.

"...If I may be so honest..." Grete spoke up. "I assumed that the other team members would sooner or later develop feelings for you as well..."

"Stop. I don't even want to think about that."

"That we would be fighting for Boss, and that it would destroy our team." Thinking about it, that was the worst possible scenario. A team in painful awkward relationships would have been hell.

"However, whenever I was disguised as the Boss, they all supported me..."

"I see." Ron nodded.

An action that fit them.

"This really is a good team...I like [Tomoshihi]." Grete sighed.

She also spoke of the future of the team. She had continued to work it all out on her own, but relying on the others wasn't too bad either. Really, spending time with people you trust is a good thing.

—Because this world would not show any kindness towards them.

Right as Ron arrived at the entrance, Lily jumped out.

"What's wrong? You don't look so good."

As if she had found something not how it should be. For a second, he thought it was about **that**, but it seemed to have been something else.

"U-Um! Tia-chan and the others should have come home from the mission already, right?"

"That's how it should have been, yes?"

They were tasked to trace the leftovers of [Shikabane], so that they wouldn't miss anything. The greater half had been taken care of by Ron.

"They haven't returned yet..."

Ron thought about the four members. The charming and elegant, black-haired Tia, the arrogant bluish-silver-haired girl Monika, the pure ashen-pink-haired girl Annette, and the indifferent blonde-haired Elna.

"They have Elna with them, so they might have ended up in some delays caused by accidents..."

Ron felt that something was off. And whenever he had a bad premonition like this, it was mostly spot-on.

"It's night already. Let's wait until noon."

"What if they don't come back?"

"Search for them—An emergency information. Keep yourselves prepared."

Though he was still calm, half of him was already sure that they would not be coming home by then.

And, this premonition turned out to be true. The four girls disappeared without a trace.

Deep at night, the black-haired girl Tia slowly separated from her bed.

Inside a single room of a hotel, the four girls had to rent a single room, as their expenses didn't suffice. With only two beds, two people had to use a single one together. Because of this, she couldn't sleep properly.

As she looked in the mirror found inside the room, she spotted her ever-beautiful appearance. With her slender bodyline, yet also built well where it mattered, she had glittering black hair. Her lips radiated with a strong red, sparkling whenever she would lick them.

But...

Tia sighed.

The problem is that I cannot take care of this situation with just my body...

What should she do about this?

"So you're awake as well."

She heard a voice. It came from the window. A bluish-silver-haired girl sat inside the window frame, flashing an arrogant grin. With a gender-neutral appearance, normal body stature, her hairstyle was a bit more distinct, but there was nothing that would make her stick out. Just like Ron and Guido, she was the example of a first-rate spy—Monika.

Apparently, she had been out until now, because she was wearing their mission attire.

"Annette and Elna are sleeping?"

"Yes. It's been a long time since I had sung a lullaby for them...around one month."

"Ain't too long ago, is it."

"Grete taught me. Fufu, using the techniques I taught her, she should have no trouble enjoying Sensei's presence in bed right about now."

"I think that your advice would only bring the opposite effect."

Giving awfully harsh words Monika jumped off the windowframe.

"And, what're you gonna do?" She glared at Tia.

"What do you mean?"

"Ain't that obvious? I don't have much time, so hurry up."

Her words showed clear threat, that trying to cover it up would not work.

Right about there, Monika pointed the muzzle of the gun at Tia.

"You're going to betray [Tomoshibi]? If so, then just hurry up and tell me."

Monika flashed yet another confident grin.

"—I'll have to take care of your dead body after all."

This catastrophic situation came without warning. Tia gulped, and gazed over at the ashen-pink-haired girl, sleeping soundly behind her—Annette. She had to find a way to break out of this situation. In order to stop the collapse of [Tomoshibi], she had to act herself, right now.

Afterword

Been a while, Takemachi here.

Though this doesn't exactly belong in the afterword of volume 2, I would like to talk about the first day volume 1 went on sale. The first volume had been sold under the wings of Fantasia Publishing's editorial department. Receiving a luxurious PV, adding Ron, the seven girls even received voice actresses. At certain bookstores, they even had panels of them. Online, we equally had advertisements everywhere. The wonderful illustrator for this series, tomari-sensei, even published illustrations on Twitter.

—Yes, seven girls, indeed.

The editorial department, the voice actresses, the shop owners, I even wrapped up tomari-sensei in this, as they all helped me to lie to you, so I want to thank them here. Thank you very much.

I do feel bad for our 'What misfortune...' girl, who had to stay in the shadows until the last part of volume 1, so I hope that we can give her some more attention in the future. Please, editor-san.

Now, the thanks.

First, tomari-sensei, who has helped greatly with her beautiful illustrations starting from volume one. Thank you very much. From now on, the illustrations will contain the keys of the story, so I would be delighted if you would stick with me.

Next, R-san, who has given me great advice not only during the creation of volume one, but also here with volume two, a very special thanks.

To all my beloved readers who bought the second installment of Spy Room as well. I don't think I can ever put into words how grateful I am. Hence, I will try my utmost to deliver you just as much of a hopefully enjoyable time in the future as well.

As some of you might have seen, a comicalization for Spy Room has been announced. For smaller details and such, please follow the official Twitter account.

One last thing. After the release of volume 1, a certain girl had won the popularity poll online, and was elected to be on the cover of volume 2, yet never appeared in the actual story. The reason for this—I want you to judge once you see the title and contents of volume 3.

I will try my best in the future as well, so that I can live up to everyone's expectations.

Until then, this has been Takemichi.